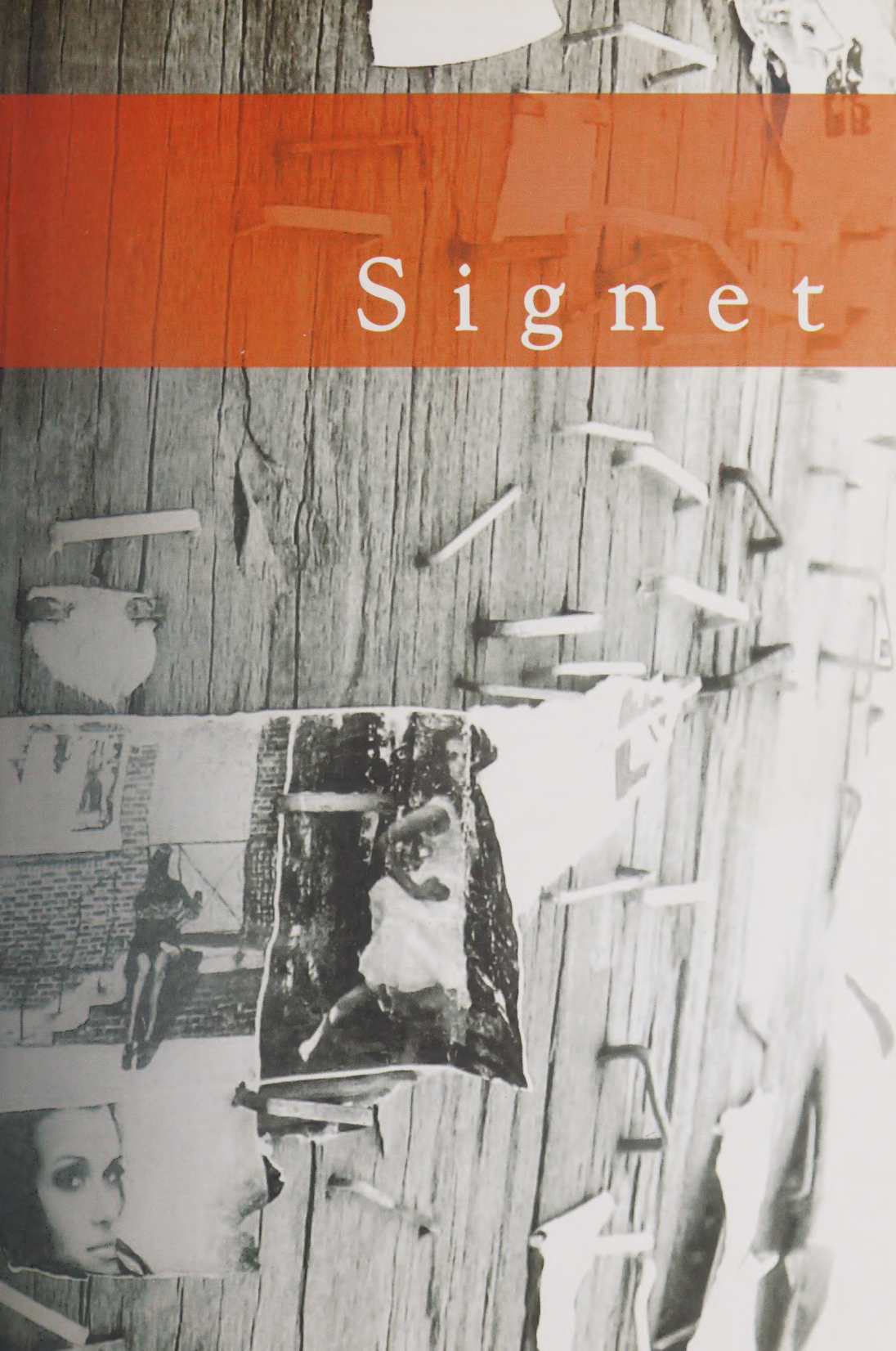
Signet

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Hi,

If you're reading this, you should know that you're literate. Also, this is kind of a big deal. I mean the new issue of Signet, although the ability to read is pretty awesome as well. Before I get too distracted, I want to say that a lot of work went into making this magazine. Our staff dedicated time, energy, and sleep to create the pages you hold in your hands. Thank you to everyone on staff who toiled on this for hours on end. I would also like to extend a huge thanks to Professor Renfroe, who was an amazing advisor for Signet and a mentor for my own writing.

I hope you can find something in our magazine that pleases, frightens, or amuses you.

Happy reading,

Faith Lippard
Senior Editor

Hey, faithful readers!

So happy you've picked up a copy of our literary magazine. Experience it, think on it, put it down and come back to it after a while. And if I'm standing next to you, overly compliment it and allow me to lavish in your praises. No, but seriously, I hope you enjoy it.

A huge shout out to the staff this year, everyone played a vital role in making this a cohesive magazine, their time and effort never goes unappreciated. To everyone who submitted: thank you for your selflessness; it was an honor to be able to read and view all of your submissions. Picking was hard, but because there were so many wonderful submissions. Hopefully, we've come up with something that properly reflects the literary diversity at Queens. I'm so proud to be a part of this community, full of talent and dedication to learning and to inspiring ourselves and each other. So, I'm going to keep this short. Get to reading!

Love and respect always,

Bree Stallings
Junior Editor

Masthead

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Signet

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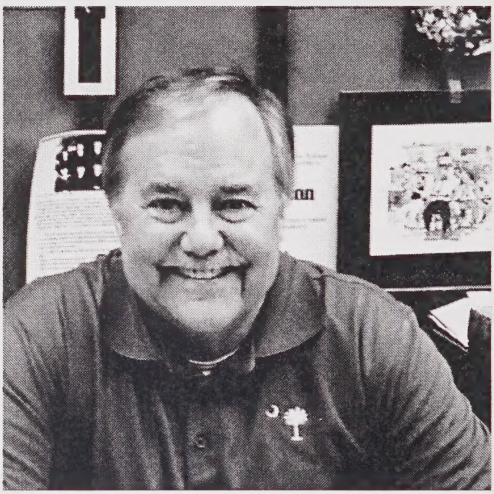
Spotlight: Dr. James Glenn

Jen Windland



"Happy Thursday!" and "Holy buckets!" are criteria for the new Music Department chair, according to Matt Gumb. Dr. Glenn, the current and retiring department chair, has set a high standard for any new candidate hoping for the position.

Along with his permanent smile and ever-willing-to-talk attitude, Dr. James Glenn has an incredible repertoire. He's taught classes at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois, Elon College in North Carolina, the University of Oklahoma, and Brainerd Sr. High School in Minnesota. He was the paid tenor at Trinity Presbyterian Church, conducted the Charlotte Youth Oratorio Seniors and conducted a master class at the National Association of Teachers and Singers (which is a big deal). He conducts the Queens Choral and gives voice lessons to students in addition to academic classes – his favorite is music history, specifically the Baroque period.

On top of his credentials and other teaching jobs, Dr. Glenn loves Charlotte – and he loves Queens. They've treated him exceptionally for the last twenty-three years, he says, and he is excited to get back to teaching in the music department rather than heading it.

That's right: Dr. Glenn is, in fact, retiring, but he plans to continue teaching a few days a week. He says he's ready to get out of paperwork and back into conducting, his true passion.

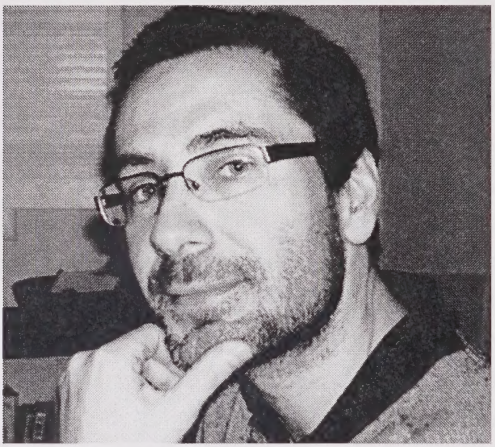
Not that he hasn't loved working as the department chair; Dr. Glenn has been heading the department since 2007 and it has taken him away from the teaching he loves to do, so it's time to hand the reins over. Dr. Glenn hopes the new department chair, (as of yet undecided) will come in with ideas – not plans. Ideas lead to plans that others can contribute to, and it's important to involve the team.

And the team, including the students, is sad to see Dr. Glenn go. Many will miss his fascination with Siri and his undying love for her. They'll miss his abundantly positive attitude and his ability to listen to student spiels. And don't worry, he doesn't want you to attack Jesus, just to pronounce his name correctly. "He is an uplifting personality," says Kim Laster. Yes, is, not has. After twenty-three years, James Glenn is headed out to sleep in and golf as much as possible in between traveling the world with his wife.

Although Dr. Glenn will no longer be an intimate part of the change, he looks forward to watching Queens continue to do so.

Interview with Morri Creech

Joel Ferdon



Biography

Morri Creech is the Writer in Residence at Queens University of Charlotte, where he teaches courses in both the Undergraduate Creative Writing Program and in the Low-Residency M.F.A. Program. He also coordinates the Queens English Department Visiting Writers Series. He has won a number of awards for his poetry, including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a North Carolina Artist's Grant, the Anthony Hecht Poetry Prize, the Stan and Tom Wick Poetry Prize, and a Ruth Lilly Fellowship from the Modern Poetry Foundation. He has published widely in such journals and magazines as "Poetry," "The Sewanee Review," "The New Republic," "The New Criterion," "The Southern Review," and "The Yale Review," and his work has been included in such anthologies as Penguin/Longman's "Poetry: a Pocket Anthology" and "The Swallow Anthology of New American Poets." Creech lives in Charlotte with his wife and two daughters.

Morri Creech sits out in the bright sun on a near spring day, his blue blazer and stark white shirt glint in the sun. The Queens University of Charlotte Poet-In-Residence has a new collection of poetry forthcoming from Waywiser Press, titled The Sleep of Reason, and he was gracious enough to sit down and discuss the book with me.

How long did it take you to write the book?

It took me five years to write it. I took a year and a half off between my first and second book to write, and the second book was very different as a result. This new book is a reflection of the point I am at in my life. It's contemporary and current to not only my life, but also the world.

Professor Creech discussed two of the new poems in the book, "Banking Hours" and "Age of Wonders" with me. The first, a reflection on and an exploration of death, and the latter is all about waking up in the new year of 2011 and being aware of the sense of life. In response to these themes he said:

"I'm possibly half way through my life, and I not only wanted to explore the ideas of dying, but also the ideas of what I have right now—the important things."

How did you go about getting your book published? Did you have a two book deal with Waywiser?

No two book deal, but I was lucky enough that the same press that published my second book also picked this one up. Some poets, like Jonathan Holden, who had five books published, had so send their sixth book out to publishers as if it was their first time. There's no security for poets when it comes to publishers. I got very lucky because Waywiser usually doesn't publish books outside of first book contests. I could have sent out to other presses, but Waywiser has been very good to me, so I decided to go with them again.

Professor Creech sipped on a hot cup of coffee and let the sunshine into his eyes. Every question was like bringing up a new memory—I could see his eyes and mind begin to race and think up his responses.

Where did your title come from?

It came from a painting by the artist Goya. The painting depicts the artist asleep with bats and birds circling his head. The two major themes of the book, sleep and birds, not only generated the title but also the themes. There was an inscription that went along with the painting that translated into "The sleep of reason produces monsters." These poems were commenting upon the frustrations I had for my dreams for life, and what life actually is for me.

At this point in the interview I bring up Louisiana, Professor Creech's home for over a decade. When I do so, the conversation changes.

What are some of the biggest differences in the poetry when it comes to writing part of the book in Louisiana and part of it in Charlotte?

Living in Charlotte has had more of an urban effect on the poems. I truly feel the fact that I am living in a suburban place, and it has taken a toll on the poems. Take, for example, the poem from the book "Song and Complaint." It has a lot of urban elements: car alarms going off, breaking glass, and an overall urban anxiety.

If you had to give advice to the young writers at Queens, what would it be?

Don't forget that it's about the passion! We writers want to have an impact on people's lives. Remember what Joseph Brodsky said "Either to give or get a boost from the language." Well, I think you should both give and get the boost from the language you are using.

Professor Creech, throughout the entirety of the interview, spoke with a level of passion that can be seen in each one of his poems in his new book. The poem that is showcased in this magazine, "The Choice," shows a love of imagery, methodical form, and an overall love for the craft of poetry.

The Choice

Morri Creech

for Sarah

What chose us? Just as well to ask what chose
the chinaberry and wild olive and close-
cropped weeds in the friend's yard where we met
or the noise and traffic of whatever street
had brought us there. Wind made the pattern of
the yellow sun dress you were wearing move
a little, in a larceny that took
possession of the light and made me look.

You spoke. Or else I did. The past is fiction.
But I can say whatever dereliction
of purpose conjured us together here
in these changing roles that suit us every year
we choose it as our own again tonight
beneath the lucid tyranny of starlight.

Nonfiction

Checking a Different Box

Natalie Stewart

Her name was Dareth, which I found incredibly androgynous and unique. She was no taller than 5'2 and had the tiny body of a child tennis-pro-hopeful. The summer had intensified the tiny brown freckles that covered her from hair line to toe nail and lightened her gold hair in perfect lines to the bun at the crown of her head. I was 18 years old; she was 27. We didn't exactly have the same hobbies, so we would never have met if we didn't work in the same restaurant. I was a hostess at Village Tavern, an upscale casual neighborhood place where the hillbillies could feel fancy and the lawyers let their hair down over a decent cosmopolitan.

From my post behind the podium at the front door, I could see into the open doorway of the dark bar past the tie-back black curtains where she stood center stage.

It started with jokes.

"Why does this place always hire cute girls that I can't touch?"

"To torture you," I replied.

"They say Greensboro, North Carolina is one of the gayest cities on the east coast, but all I see are breeders."

"Better convert," I said.

Dareth would flirt with the soccer moms on Friday night over their $6 glass of shitty Chardonnay. After the crowd died down I hopped over to the bar for a chance to tease her.

"How's the cougar hunt going?" I asked.

"These ladies are ready to pounce!" She grinned.

"Too bad they all went home to their investment banker husbands and 2.5 children."

"Hey, sooner or later everyone gets sick of the same old missionary position."

For someone so cocky, we all knew she was a big mush underneath. She had to be one of the boys even if it meant acting like a seventh grader trying to touch his first boob.

One especially slow night, the staff decided to go out for drinks. The same group usually went together to a tiny pub nearby with broken lightbulbs and cheap pints.

"Hey, you should come to Keegan's," Dareth called to me across the bar as she swept.

"I'm only 18."

"They only play Merle Haggard on the jukebox. You're fine."

The night began with a round of Jagermister shots. By two AM we were all slurring how much we loved each other over Marlboro and Miller Lights. Dareth used this opportunity to begin teasing me about how young I was.

"I would totally try and take you home if you weren't twelve."

"Well I would toootally let yous. if yous didn't have an AAAR an A a—"

"An AARP card?" she replied laughing.

Even at the tender age of 18, I had developed enough of a wit to know I could hold my own with her.

"Let's get you in a cab hot mess."

Even in my drunken stupor on the cab ride home alone, I kept thinking about what kissing her would be like. It must be so gentle and welcoming, like tomato soup and grilled cheese on a cold day. Relationships with men were notoriously confusing. They seemed to maintain a constant poker face, and asking them to express their feelings was worse than asking them to sit through an episode of "The Real Housewives." With a girl there would be snuggly Saturday nights in matching velour sweat suits, an herb garden in the summer, and Oscar instead of Super bowl parties.

I was a white Christian. I was never part of a minority percentage. This would finally give me a chance to be outside the norm. If I were gay, I would be cooler than a black pair of Converse kicks. The idea had me excited, in the same way I felt the first time I drove a car. Little did I know it was more like parallel parking without a rearview mirror.

After a few more trips to the neighborhood bar, I finally got the courage to kiss her. We had been flirting all night and I saw the chance to act out my plan. I told her I was too drunk to drive and asked for a ride home. Once we pulled in the driveway I opened my mouth to express my silky suave desire to kiss her, but instead what came out was a hurried nervous expression of: IReallyWantToKissYou. INeverKissedAGirlBefore.

She laughed and leaned over, grabbing my face in her hands.

I immediately broke out in a fit of girlish giggles.

"What is wrong with you?" she exclaimed.

"Nothing, let's try it again. I'll stop, I promise."

Her lips were so soft, kind of like mine but smaller, with a hint of Burt's Bees Wax. She wrapped her arms around my neck, which had always been my go-to move. Shit what do I do now? That bitch stole my move, I thought to myself. Mid-kiss and back to square one of the planning stages, I felt her hairless soft arm against mine. We must use the same Body Shop lotion. OK stop. Focus! You can't be bad at this, or she'll find some other confused underage hostess. We are everywhere.

Dareth and I had been dating a few months when I graduated high school. Because she didn't want our relationship to turn into an awkward Lifetime movie plot, she had been adamant that we do nothing more than kiss while I was still in school. I protested that I was still 18 and technically an adult. "If you spend your day according to a schedule of bells in a building full of Hello Kitty purses, you are not an adult," she replied.

The group of us that frequented the pub decided to take a trip to Key West together. It happened that the day we left was the day of my graduation. I would be celebrating entering adulthood with my lady friend surrounded by Jimmy Buffet and pride flags. What more could a girl ask for? I jumped out of bed that morning and ran to curl my hair minutes before the alarm went off. As I pressed down the center pleat of my white cotton summer dress, I couldn't help but notice how fabulous I looked with my meticulously placed careless beach waves that took an hour with the curling iron--feminine but certainly not overdone.

The whole ceremony was a blur. My name was called, I went up for my diploma. While everyone else was throwing their caps in the air, as if they had reached some great triumph, I reached for my purse under the seat Congratulations: you didn't break the law by dropping out. I made a beeline for my car while everyone else was hugging relatives and taking pictures, beaming smiles plastered on their stupid little faces. I didn't belong with these people. They had supportive families, and I had a deaf grandfather who waved when I told him I'd be gone for a week with my lady lover. "Be careful!" he shouted directly into my ear as if I was the one who was hearing-impaired. I jumped into my 94 Buick LeSabre and headed for the highway towards the Charlotte airport two hours away.

A few hours later I landed in Miami, ecstatic to have missed the YMCA lock-in thrown for the class of 2004. Our coworker Leslie had driven down from North Carolina with liquor and weed in tow that the conservative airline wouldn't allow as carry-ons. She picked me up from the airport so we could finish the last stretch to the Keys together.

After what should have taken two hours turned into four because Leslie was so damn stoned, we finally arrived at the house right on Duval Street, the center of shenanigans in Key West. Getting out of the car, I looked around to see the crowd that had migrated here from all over the country: cut-off jean shorts, and drag queens, and roller blades. Oh My!

About to burst from excitement, we walked in to the appropriately decorated neon beach house. It had all the accoutrements 20-somethings could need: a bar, a grill, sundeck, and hot tub off the back of the house tucked away under palm trees as tall as the two-story home.

We walked in ready to go; I had my fake ID and a skirt so short you could see your reflection in my shiny granny panties. It was dead quite in the house. Jesus, it was only 9:00pm: What was going on? As we crossed the linoleum hallway, we saw two guys passed out on the couch with a blender and two straws beside them on the floor. Moving on we saw the patio and all its fun attractions through two open glass doors past the fainted fairies.

"Sweet!" Leslie said. "There's a hot tub and—"

She was cut short by the sight of a hot-pink thong beside the Jacuzzi.

"Already, it's the first day!" I cried.

We made our way back inside and up the sketchy spiral staircase to the tower that held two more bedrooms, each in their own unique neon shade of purple and green. In the purple room Geoff, Dareth's best friend, was passed out on a tiny twin bed still made up from the people who had been there the more-straight weekend before. Geoff was 6'2"; the sight of his tall, lanky ass hanging over this child's bed was more absurd than I could begin to explain.

Later that night we were all liquored up and ready to go hit the streets. We piled out of the house looking ridiculous: There was Dareth in her tank top and designer jeans that were baggy on her tiny frame. Geoff was there in a basketball jersey and baggy cargo shorts looking straight straight straight.

Then there was Chris, who was a smaller, gayer version of Peter Pan with his Capri pants, flip-flops, and skin tight wife beater that he had bought in the children's section of Target. Chris's straight roommate Sarah followed. She was tall, thin, tan, and had the most beautiful cascading blond hair. She kept saying how excited to be along for the fun without fear of being hit on by anything other than lesbians that could never break her heart but buy her all the vodka in Florida. Leslie was ready to go in her snap away track pants that only had two stripes running vertically down the sides, a dead giveaway that she would rather spend her money on drugs than the name brand Adidas and their third stripe. Then there was me. I couldn't tell you what I was wearing that night because I was so blasted by that point I only remember what was told to me later. I realize now that I wasn't wearing pants because at some point before we even reached the bar I threw my jade-green shiny granny panties across Duval Street. Apparently when you throw your underwear at a drag queen, and they aren't boxer briefs, the buxom beauties tend to get a little pissed, because I was immediately smacked in the face by my drawers with a warning to keep my "breeder activities" in Myrtle Beach. It was only day one of gay pride week, and already I had become the outcast.

Dareth grabbed my arm and pulled me back to the house saying that I was embarrassing her. It wasn't the first time our age difference had been an issue, but it was the first time I cared. I felt like a child being scolded for grabbing candy in a grocery store, but you can't stick an 18 year old budding bisexual in a parade full of fruit cakes and expect her not to get a little excited.

That night Dareth and I slept in different rooms. I cried for hours. It was the night I thought I would be losing my homosexual virginity, and all I lost was my ugly underwear.

A few weeks later back in Greensboro, we had reconciled and decided to celebrate. This was what I had waited for. I spent the whole day researching techniques. I wasn't half-assing this, if I was going to be gay, I would be gay all the way.

After about a half hour and a case of lock-jaw I realized the vagina was a VIN diagram that I couldn't quite figure out. Dareth tapped me on the head and informed me that this just wasn't going to work. I insisted I could

do better. I would Google the shit out of this practice and have it down pat within the hour. She shook her head and informed me that I was so straight I wouldn't know my way around a curve. I couldn't believe it: she was wrong—she had to be.

That night I cried so hard I threw up. I had never had my heart broken before, so this was what it must be like, but I wasn't really sure what I was crying for. We were still going to be friends, we worked together, so we had too. The break-up wasn't harsh or nasty in any way, so I couldn't be mad at her. What was really upsetting was that I had failed my attempt to be different. I wasn't dumped by Dareth: I was breaking up with the possibility of having a beautiful life with a woman and the adopted Chinese baby in the trendy downtown loft I had pictured for us.

Today, I live in a 1200 square foot, two-bedroom bungalow with my straight Caucasian boyfriend. I love my boyfriend and we have a beautiful relationship. I just wish he had a little more of a minority factor to contribute to our twosome. His only differentness includes a stint at a predominately African-American college on a minority scholarship for being white. In 2012 that gets no higher than a solid D+ on the differently cool scale. Is it so much to ask that he be black or even Jewish? The only minority aspects of our house these days are our black dogs and even they are pretty average. We both work hard to save up for the boring things like a house, cars, and a wedding one day. This isn't how I pictured my life at all--I wanted to be fighting with grandparents about moving to Vermont where ladies can marry ladies and get tax breaks. Unfortunately, I didn't get the bid for that sorority.

Dareth and I still talk every now and again. She moved to the coast with a new girlfriend, who I'm sure doesn't make her feel like a science experiment. We connect via email or Facebook to drop the annual "Happy Birthday" and "Merry Christmas." It's nice to know she didn't judge my desperation enough to cut off contact completely. I like to think she considers herself a teacher to me, and the time we spent together as entertaining if nothing else.

To do this day she still insists that I am "the biggest closeted breeder" she's ever met.

Survivor

Shannon Fraser

You realize how human you are when you are immersed in a place lower than ground level. Your mind is isolated in that moment, putting your organs to the test of survival. Can you steady your heartbeat when an organism approaches to shake your hand? Can you control your breath through your lungs, focusing on the essential breathe in, breathe out motion? The speed of your feet running along the ground is lost, and you lack any form of protection. All electricity burns away once you're there, and words can only swim in your thoughts, so your ears fall asleep. It becomes a foreign country; you rely only on nonverbal communication to paint the words. This place, vast with curiosity walking the waves, is located on the coast of Puerto Rico, it is the Caribbean Sea.

The sun kisses your skin as you approach the water. Light and dark turquoise swirls shade the water, but when you cup the liquid in your hands it lays there, clear. The water's temperature awakens the hairs on your arm, but warms your soul. Everyone has seen an ocean that resembles the Caribbean, but not everyone has seen under the water, forty feet deep. There are a few hours of training that occur before submerging yourself in a place that dissolves all oxygen.

You stand there in a bikini showing far too much to the assortment of strangers desiring to explore this underworld. You were given flippers and goggles, which you grip tightly, knowing that you're screwed if you lose them. The scuba instructors hand you the rest of the supplies, and your adrenaline starts to flood your veins. Strings of weights are tied around your waist, hugging your curves in all wrong. The air smells of heat and salt. Then someone walks with you to the edge of the boat like a classic pirate film—victim walking the plank. Only instead of your hands tied behind your back, your feet are smothered in flippers that make you look like it's the first time you've used your legs.

The last words you hear are the countdown to three. The boat seems most unstable at that moment, each jagged wave brushing the sides in whichever direction it pleases. You whisper to God as you leave the surface

and slide into the ocean like a pill down a throat; quick with a rush of water. You want to pretend you're a fish and swim quicklyto the bottom, but you have to descend slowly while taking air out of your flotation jacket. You can see the subtle spot where the sun is trying to reach the water with its arms. The water is foggy, and each piece of salt treads your lips. You signal "I'm okay," and "I have air" with your hands, and you keep moving your feet to get deeper.

There are no walls in this serenity. You can't see farther than twenty feet, so each spot fascinates the mind. You've never felt as light as you do at this moment. You're in this water pretending to swirl your fin around like a mermaid. All judgment vanishes, all desire for material goods; you are a transcendentalist for the day. Your eyes act as a telescope to the stars, each new element pulling your attention.

There beside you are fish, dark grey and blue. There, to your left, is a massive rock-coral-castle combination. You've been placed in a huge fish tank, with the tacky rainbow castles and fake plants, except everything here is real. T in sss areFish are playing hide-and-seek with each other through the coral. You get close to one of the orange corals; a large pottery bowl you probably made when you were seven. The bowl has thick hair flowing in the water, and when you get closer to pet it, the hair shoots back inside the coral, as if it was never there. Then there is the school, the little fishes about the size of your palm, sticking together in hundreds. of rushing into the center of the school and watching them squirm away, with their little fins flicking your skin, makes you powerful. Until a massive fish is recognized.

It looks like a shadow of a fishing boat moseying in the distance. Breathe. You can't tell if it is disappearing away from you, or getting larger. The fog prickles your anxiety. You point, hoping your team of divers notices what summons you. No one prepared you for this. Swimming with sharks may be on your bucket list, but in a cage, not frolicking through the ocean. The Caribbean holds all forms of organisms, and the one you're thinking of has probably eaten plenty of them.

Your muscles feel weak as a corpse drifting through the ocean. There is nowhere for you to go. The water is darker where you are, grazing the sand. You grab ahold of some sand and toss a pile up. The specks scatter in front of your goggles. The shark does not approach the group, even though it would have secretly been awesome if it had. You watch its back fin vanish into the fog.

Creatures that you could not paint on canvas appearnext. These moments make it seem like fictional story that you're traveling through. There is a yellow fish that waltzes right in front of you. Its eyes are hanging off of long tubes that float away from its sides. Then its children follow, trying hard to stay in a line, ach one a different Crayola shade of yellow. The water is warm on your body now. Happiness runs freely in your body with every new thing that appears. Your eyes feel they've lost perception when a fish emerges that looks as if a tire has driven over it. The fish is a large purple pancake, but when it turns to stare you in the eyes it is as skinny as your finger. You want to hold it with your hands on each side and kiss it.

You keep following your instructor; time has been lost for days now. He tells you to ascend—but to be careful not to awaken your ears, or they will start a piercing ring and sharp pain down into their core. You think you are still forty feet below until you look up, and you are staring into a turquoise shield of blurring waves, rippling. It's a wall between this peace and above. You stay a few more seconds, desiring to morph into a fish just a bit longer.

You glide up through the screen of mystery. All your senses react. Taking a large breath, you allow the air to fly down your throat and nose. Your ears immediately awaken to an abrupt alarm of music blasting off the ship and people cheering you on, for surviving the underworld. Your eyes have to adjust to the new color spectrum; everything is bright, but not nearly as fascinating. You float on your back to push yourself toward the ship; your strength has been worn out. The waves thread themselves over your torso. Salt water licks your tongue, making you realize how thirsty you are.

Everyone is in bliss. They just experienced a worshipping of the wonders of nature. Someone all but lifts you into the boat, your exhausted body showing you've won. You stand, admiring the beauty of the waves, proud you know some of the unknowns that lie underneath the curves. Breathing air has never felt so good.

Making Pork: An Anecdote

Alina Labrador

The dining hall is a place of emotion.

There is the morbid curiosity of the salad bar, the guilt of the pizza station, the hope and idealism of the hot plates, the longing of the desert trays. There is the resigned sigh of the juices and sodas, and the silver-lining relief hidden in the ketchup-mustard-mayo-tabasco nook.

The problem is not in variety or quality of food, but the focus. The mashed potatoes and mac n' cheese casseroles and fries and pizza and fettucine alfredo are all center stage. There is a roast, yes, or a bourbon pork, or perhaps some breaded fish, but we eat them mechanically, slathered in gravy, in sauce, in breadcrumbs, and chewed without purpose. The main carbohydrate is merely accessorized with a meat, and a colorful veggie that won't be consumed, perhaps a mushroom or bread bun that tells us mournfully that they are included, as a free gift to you, please love them.

I always try the rice; it's a self-destructive habit. It is often past redemption, but I hope. The variety is dizzying: Cajun rice, Mexican rice, Jasmine rice, Risotto. I thought that rice was a simple thing, but it's usually hard, rubbery, dry; ruined.

The dining hall feeds, but it kills that fundamental, bone-deep lust for food. I begin to believe I'll never salivate at the smell again, I'll go through life force-feeding myself, scheduling to keep from accidentally starving.

I become depressed, fatalistic. I decide that I will never again love my food, so I may as well save some money and make it myself.

Even then, at the grocery store, I hesitate. What if it comes out badly, if I hate it, if it makes me sick? This is worst for the proteins. I don't know how to make steak! And it's so expensive! I don't want to buy that just to ruin it! There is nothing as tragic as a ruined steak, shriveled and accusing, inedible, awaiting the trash.

With a prayer I buy the pork, I make rice. I panic and look up recipes, debate, compare, ask advice. I finally compromise, not to cook it just yet, but to marinate. This is not procrastination, I promise. Let it get used to me, and I resigned to it, and maybe we'll be friends.

The time finally comes, and I heat the pan cautiously. Not too much oil. I toss in the garlic, my talisman, a leftover from watching my father start every single dish with a good clove or two thrown in hot oil. I hope it will bring me luck, cover my mistakes, fix the too much salt or too little salt or too wet or too dry.

I cook, and the smells of my preparation fill the kitchen. Somehow this is the worst; I stamp down hope. I know the smell does not always equal the taste. Even here I can ruin it; I may undercook, I may overcook. I may burn it or forget to add salt and then my food tastes like awful, ruined mush. I supervise the browning: we must add flavor, but never allow it to burn. The burn is the flavor-killer, the sourer, the destroyer of meals.

Finally, there's nothing more to be done. I serve myself, I hope. I pick out my faithful steak knife and slice. There is a wash of relief to see that, at least, I have cooked it thoroughly. It is not too tough, either. Maybe I can choke it down. I take a bite.

It is moist; a little lemony, a little spicy. It is more tender than any pork anyone has ever served me at a restaurant, cheap or posh, at home or here, more tender than any pork chop my father has made me. The garlic-olive-oil-lemon-juice-pork-juice soaks into the rice, salting it, moistening. The thin, fatty pockets in the pork taste fantastic, having embraced my marinade. I eat my modest piece of pork and rice, delighted. I cannot imagine eating anything so awful as to make me forget this. I think how I will make this again, I will make it for my father someday, and he'll say, solemnly, how delicious it is.

I am home.

Buggy

Faith Lippard

"Punch-buggy, no punch-back," was a well-used phrase in my vocabulary by the time I was eight years old. One that I knew how to say so fast that you could really only hear the word "punch" before I did so to the nearest arm, This was largely due to my dad owning an off-white 1973 Volkswagen Beetle, a car I liked to call "Buggy" because its large headlights looked like wide bug eyes staring at me. It was a small car compared to my mom's handed-down, long Mercedes and perfect for my height as I didn't even need to hunch down to get in. I was a very short kid and loved to squeeze myself into tiny places, whether that was under a desk, inside a cupboard, or in the backseat of Buggy. While the other spots were handy for hide-and-seek, Buggy was always my favorite. The backseat was one long bench seat separated by two shiny, and in the summer, scorching, seatbelts. The black material felt like leather to me, though I don't know what it actually was, and I liked to run my hand across the smooth material. In the winter, the heat would warm the car like a cozy fireplace where campfire stories were recounted of everyone's day or fights over who was going to hold the pick-up order of pizza on their lap.

My favorite outings in Buggy were when my dad, my two siblings, and I would all cram into the car and drive my older sister to Karate practice. Every Thursday evening we would drive out to some small town outside of Charlotte, my brother and I in the backseat, while my older sister sat in the front with my dad. The whole way there I would insist on opening the side window that you could crank and push out. It was triangular and just the right size for my small hand, which I used to wave at passing cars.

Once we dropped my sister off at a large gymnasium, the real fun would begin. My dad would let us go to the BP gas station and get snacks. This was a luxury and treat, as my mom didn't ever buy things like bottled soda or Little Debbie cakes. But the best part was when we'd take our sweets and park by the airport. In spite of the temperature, we would hop out and watch the planes take off and land. This was another treat for me because I'd never been on a plane, neither of my siblings had, and none of my friends

had either. To me they looked almost like glowing spaceships in the dark, and I loved to sit on the lip of the front bumper and chew on an Oatmeal Creme Pie as I watched these large machines swoop over my head, always to safely land on the runway. When we were done and it was time to pick my sister up, my brother and I would crawl back into the car. In the colder months, we were always happy to feel the heat kick back on as we drove down the road. With my feet dangling above the floor, my brother asleep against my shoulder, and the diesel engine a comforting rumble, I would feel the safest I've ever felt; safe and warm inside Buggy.

Poetry

Trampled by Poetry

Mary Jasperse

I had to write a poem
In a method very strange,
But the feet kept scampering
Instead of being placed.

I tried to search iambs,
Not pictures of fluffy sheep,
But was disappointed
By Shakespeare, Milton, Yeats.

It really wasn't flowing—
Syllables failed to match.
Can I use contractions?
That is crucial to ask.

Through the entire poem,
I was struck with urge to rhyme,
But that was not the assignment,
So I don't have the time.

So, here I've neared the end
Of a lesser traveled road.
And if you didn't know,
An allusion was just made.

My Brother in the Living Room

Brynn Feeney

Shreds of colored paper
All over the wooden floor
Of the living room, where
Mother kept her nice things –
Glass vases in the windows
Hand-woven rugs, porcelain figurines
And a Chinese tea set
I had a secret tea party with –
He'd watched from the kitchen
Afraid to join in.

We thought
The dogs did it, maybe the cats
But my little brother
Came trudging through, his cheeks
Tear-stained and blotchy
His eyes glazy blue.
He'd ripped them up
Just to start all over again
Nothing was good enough so
I asked what he drew.

With his serious voice
And serious face
He said, "You."

Faith

Liz Westfield

Faith bears quietly
The agony of her yoke
Beneath the torn rags,
Her skin holds an iridescent glow.
Her burden is heavy
Yet she holds it high:
A banner of her drive,
And pushes on while being despised.
Exiled by science, questioned by people
And summed up as crazy by ones who throw the stones
Of facts and logic to be stuck in her plow,
They only think of how to bring her down.
But don't dare judge by looks,
Her skin is thicker than it seems.
There she remains until the end of humanity,
Because faith doesn't need reason to believe.

Israeli Change Jar

Christopher Sherfinski

Mine. It shines, lid twisted tight,
Patch of glue clinging to
The glass. A faded, painted,
Dented cap crowns the jar,
Holding Agorot that I saved
For a rainy day, in the desert.

I've never counted the coins
Before. I pour upon my floor
A golden treasure which shines
Except the one with Blood,
Brown, and dry. A fitting tribute
To a victim I wish I'd known.

As the jar accepts once more,
That which I now somberly own,
I tally the worth of small coins
And find more than I expected.

10 Things

Kat Schweitzer

I hate it when poems rhyme,
Especially when poets do it all the time.

Couplets are the worst,
I don't even care who wrote them first.

And sonnets? Don't get me started on those.
Iambic pentameter—I'd rather cut off my toes!

Alliteration is seriously irritating,
Slipping on syllables however, can be quite stimulating.

Illusion is much different from Allusion,
Like the rambles of Socrates, they create much confusion.

Assonance is the bell of Poe
Go, old foe, get out of my flow!

Euphemisms, please tell me what exactly is the point?
I feel like I'm in prison...or should I say the joint?

Satire, the mind of Swift
But without it this poem might drift

But I have to say what I hate the most...
Is all the irony this poem does host.

Reflection on A Life of Service

Christopher Sherfinski

The bench-- here it was, once a holy pew,
Then saved, and refurbished after its church
Bought new cushioned chairs. An eternal grump,
Its dislike was loud for everything new.
When the new couch arrived I could almost hear it rage,

Cushions and colors
Are devil's designs
Seducing good men
To slumber and sloth!

Its pious pontifications didn't fit, it lost
Its place. It was moved to the back of the room,
Then out the back door to the screened porch
Where it weathered a winter, hiding snow boots.

In spring the bench was moved to the yard, under a maple
Where it still sits alone, molding in its exposed grain.

I don't grieve, though I pause, to hear of its decay.
If it, one day, is burnt as firewood; So might I?

Breakfast

Holly Lopez

You crack my heart on the side
of a cast iron skillet and slip
it into the popping grease,
then wipe your burly hands
on my trust before tossing it
into the trash.
You plop a plate piled with shame
in front of me and hand me a fork.
Bile bubbles in my throat
like tainted milk as you twist
your burning cigarette.
While your fingers linger
near my Snoopy sweatpants,
the threads of my DNA
work frantically to separate
from yours.

I slam my lids shut and imagine
I can seep like melted butter
into the crevices of the floor.

Mother of Terror

Mickele Hieronymus

"And Adam called his wife's name Eve,
Because she was the mother of all living."
--Genesis 3:20

They tell me I am a good mother.
How I dote on these dear children.
If I do, it is the fear of reprise that drives me.
My late, lustful nights linger as
still shots in my head.

Maybe I started that
war—Afghanistan.
Maybe I brought down
those gleaming towers of capitalism. Or maybe,
I may as well have.

I have not made a thing.
I am but the reflector on a guard
rail, feeding back whatever light comes my way.
Projecting all the nature and terror and beauty of this world
and lavishing in the praise and hatred it brings me
like a dark thief, on a darker night.

Odium Theologicum.

I made the children who will grow up
clinging to a blanket of terror.
They will wear and tear it up until
all is gone but a scrap,
and they will cling to it for
dear life.

Dead Letter Burning

Joel Ferdon

I never got the letter
You said was in the mail;
Some bright blue Hallmark card,
Wrapped in a neat, bleached, generic envelope
With your shaky handwriting
Spelling out my name.

Your letter,
In response to the penny postcard
I sent you the morning after
That night we had spent together;

I guess I never expected
A reply.
When you said to me
Via text message
"Watch your mail"
I couldn't help but think
Certain words would stand out
In your letter:

"Enjoyed"
"Can't wait"
"For next time"

"Write me"
"Again soon,"
"Please" "Never"

"Forget"
"About"
"Me."

What I had yearned for
Was just a glimmer.
Like Joyce had hoped
That Stephen Hero would
Disappear with spark and crackle
Of flame.

That's more what happened
To your letter;

Gone in the proverbial fire
Of the mail system.

That is, of course,
If you ever
Sent it.

Metempirical

Joel Ferdon

The first touch of a woman, the first sip of
Good beer, the first memorable scar, the first
Death, the first new life. It happen to us

All; when we cross into unfamiliar realms
We are shocked. Like jumping into a
Natural spring in early fall up high in

The blue ridge mountains. New experiences, not
Unlike old scars. They are both consistent
Reminders; like the STD test I get every year because

Of that one mistake. Infidelity is the greatest.
Like seizing one's chest over and over and
Over again; but the inevitable

Trauma at the end is not the choice,
But it is the ownership of memorable
Experience; stories to tell on crisp sheets

Near death.

Spaghetti Brain

Jane Landis

Dark sunglasses hide these bloodshot eyes.
You see a man in the mirror, on the other side.
I've always hated the putrid colour yellow.
Give me ingredients and I can make you dinner.
The grimy feeling that comes after a lie
Becomes an acquired taste for some men.
I could never learn an instrument for lack of practice.
This mocha latte has too much chocolate.
What happened to you, my sweet Irish summer?
I'm far too selfish to ever have a husband.
I'm going to need to see some I.D., ma'am.
If that phone buzzes one more time...
We thought Ganesh had finally gone away;
Alas, he attacked again through the ice cream.

Backwoods

Brynn Feeney

It rained too much this year for baling hay.
We couldn't wait for the weather
So Mr. Humphrey cut it anyway.

I can still see the hill, rising up behind our house
And the maple trees that spilled orange,
Red, and yellow leaves over the ground.

Old things inside and out: music boxes
on Grandma's dresser croon tunes I'd never heard. Black
and white photographs of people I never met and never will.

This place grows old and we grow weak.
But the hill remains – bold as it used to be
A marker to the things we can't put into words.

Dead Rabbit

Holly Lopez

There's a dead rabbit
lying in the road,
its head flat
with the asphalt.
A breeze blows on the
tufted white tail,
dispersing it like dandelion seeds.

Its mouth will no longer
tug grasses by their shaggy roots
while sunlight darkens the veins that
map across its ears like fern fronds.
It is now an object
for feet and wheels to veer around;
for boys to stab with torn twigs.

Wide-winged shadows soar in circles.
The rabbit is positioned to run,
but it does not move.
Its heart does not race;
it is no longer prey—
just trash to be hauled away.

The feathered clean-up crew descends.
Each hooked beak grips and pulls;
torn bits scatter on the pavement
like jigsaw puzzle pieces.
Thin pink strips dangle from the lips of
these bald sanitation workers.
The slick scraps slide down their
throats like shucked oysters.

The flock flies off.
Only a few bits of fur and bone
are left behind, which will be eaten
by the earth, leaving no trace
of the rabbit, no trace at all.

A Few Mundane Observations On An Everyday Situation Seen As Wonderful

Adam Raby

The words last just a frigid moment,
Suspended in the air
Quantum flux, lasting at times
Forever spread deep across 4-dimensions.
Time stretched taffy eternity
Interweaves and mingles molds shapes, collapses
Renewed! Begin again and again reformed
Over and once over more time again
-and that's okay.

Three words caress combine and form
Like poetry written by sixth-grade malcontents
And saints,
Awkward transgressions deified
Crucifictions made of the slightest glance
And deep down beautiful fragility.
Words repeated, so it's true meaning stolen and overgrown
Shrubbery untrimmed, lack of care and worth
Yet at the core the truth behind remains untarnished.
Love

The word rests at the end, relaxed and in control
Usurped by the upstart me, the you, the we-
Repurposed by single characters desperately in search
Of communality

Laughing children descended fresh Technicolor displays
Giddy with what found never lost and bright days
For these are the banquet years

Young unscarred words, unchained from dictionaries and pages
Lift towards some faroff purpose
I. Love. You.
Say it
Whisper it
Pray it
Scream it
Nurture it
Cherish it
Don't abandon it.
A mutual affection driving us towards a distant goal, an idea
Those along for the ride care not for definitions
This is a ride. Life. Love bears repeating.
I. Love. You.

A Sort-of Comfort

Bree Stallings

I walk the streets,
and orange dots on a bus marquee seem
to sprawl "Selwyn". I look
down to the concrete to catch
myself on the slick gray.

Up again at the bus and it reads
"Berwyn" and I feel my cheeks flush
at my secret foolishness—a troubling
kind of warmth that sits beneath the
skin, unready to face the city, so cold.

Melancholy with unfamiliarity, I am
alerted by the drops that fall
like heavy, untrained steps through my
coat and onto my skin, marred as a dance floor.

I thought of saying "Selwyn", not Berwyn,
"turn right on Selwyn and I will be
waiting outside" – like I always said to
those who rescued me from my liberal
arts shell, a skin that sheds as we drive
into the city.

Then, by late night, when all the sunlight
drips past the edges of the sky to flood
the elsewhere world—
we would come back and bask
in the energy that radiates between stout
southern buildings, brick with white columns
as tall and strong as fathers who always
helped lift up, but forcibly so.

I miss the nights where late becomes
early, and our conscious hours seep into
others' waking hours, a mixing and rushing
tide of waters with separate sifts
that stir and roll before eventually
one must settle first.

Lights, small and square, checker on
across the adjacent building front as men begin
their days by lamplight, grumbling
a forgotten but repeated song of strife.
They are careful not to wake their wives,
who are not agile as they had once been,
but still graced with a sober beauty,
wrapped in sheets like drapery
from friezes. Goddesses, no,
they were not, but almost
as vague, as unrequitedly lonely,
as unearthly lovely—possessing a great
distance from across the bed.

"Look, he is just starting his day",
I say as I extend my finger away
from the Styrofoam cup that warms my
lips with a dewy breath—my own exhaust,
a sort-of comfort.

Your eyes follows my finger, down each
knuckle and through the red-tipped
nail, and wing up to a striped window,
half-drawn, framing a silhouette man
in boxers stretched with permanent
wrinkles at the thigh, scratching
the back that ached him 8 hours before
and will ache him in 8 hours again.

I know that this man's life does not exist
on a campus swing, like ours, that slowly
rock to nowhere new.

I have these thoughts as I re-read
"Berwyn", that blinks bright on
the bus to confirm that I am nowhere
near home. I wonder if your thoughts
have ever mislead you back to me.

A Wish, A Dream

Bree Stallings

The more I remember, the less life lusters,
as vivid dreams overtake bland, two-creams-
one-sugar, gray-on-gray newsprint.

I meet her there—in between days, her
lips stained—stolen jewels.
On her ankle, a chain,
golden in disguise.

Coins jingle in rows strung between her hips,
a constellation of sound,
and candle light hides on
half her face; the shadows
conform around her movements.

She is light.
She is dark.

She claps my heart faster.
Her skirt follows in twirls,
oblivious of her next move.

Gypsy woman,
she dances from a childhood place
though her steps are heavy.

The moon reflects on the town's quiet lids,
though mine struggle to keep alert.
My soul chimes between salty air and the dark
undertow of sleep.

Corner Booth

Ashley Greiwe

I have never seen the moon at midnight.
I have yet to travel outside this town.
I don't think I'll be doing it soon, my dear.
We'll have to just wait for a change in the hearts and minds
Of those who think they know what is best for us.
So I lift up my glass, in hopes that you'll do the same
And sit alone thinking of our corner booth.
The small drawing I made must be gone by now;
The penguin in a top hat wiped away by cleaning spray.
I hope they removed all the gum on the bottom of the table.
It made it nearly impossible to hold your hand, but we managed.
Are you smiling as you read this letter? I hope you are.
I seem to feel an upward turn of my lips
When thoughts of you invade my troubled mind.
I have been thinking about you more than I should,
But sadly these are not all happy thoughts.
Maybe the best of use has stayed in that corner booth
And maybe we should not want it back so soon.

Hoarding Feelings

Mary Jasperse

My mother never calls me back.
She loves my sister more, I think—
At least anger is a feeling.
Holding on too long is a disease they say.

She loves my sister more. I think
Feelings are cluttered like our house.
Holding on too long is a disease. They say
Tomorrow doesn't change today.

Feelings are cluttered. Like our house,
Thoughts are best kept away from the light of day.
Tomorrow doesn't change. Today,
The silence is deafening—

Thoughts are. Best kept away from the light of day:
Excuses. Keep people away—
The silence is deafening.
The dust has settled all around us.

Excuses keep people away
At least. Anger is a feeling.
The dust has settled all. Around us,
My mother never calls me back.

Coming Out of Your Shell

Mary Jasperse

Oh, hermit crab, you seemed so sad
in your glass cell, with big eyes
peering down at you and grubby
little fingers grabbing without care.

Like you, I have felt the sear of observation,
of being more like a passing curiosity than a being,
and knowing that you are powerless—
more delicate than any creature around you.

When you retreated into your shell like the hermit
people say you are, I wished that I could
draw back inside myself, too-- away from
the platitudes and piteous glances.

When I placed you in my warm palm,
I felt the tentative brush of lithe antennae
Like dandelion snow—you're molting,
A soft reminder of the lost locks in the drain.

Now we live together, you in your
transparent home of golden sand and
rainbow shells, me in a sterile
world made only of black and white and grey.

Although your only response is the rustle
of your legs and the clink of shells, I know
that when your poke out your head as I walk
through the door, I am finally important.

Maya's Haiku

Maya Amber Sherer

Saying broken words
fall like stones, breaking heart glass
exposing harsh truth.

Purple Iris

Sarah Schwister

Parchment sun sighs in the cerulean sky
Naked calm, heart punctures, a silent war
The waves lap up the blood, come by and by
Ancient pillars, ocean stained; mark the coast
Dragging ivy, hung the life off the host
Churning emotions, the ocean drone, drone
Suffocating whispers of memories ghost
By the note, drowns, seeping ink, on its own
Taking the blame will leave you alone
Water fleeting, bare legs left and expose
The naked siren; is that what he chose?
Time breaths past, mocking, but will not falter
Night slits the sun, bleeding the sky on the water

Handkerchief Sonnet

Andy Wertz

"Always carry a Handkerchief with you."
Mama would remind me every Sunday
Before Mass when our wealth demanded praise.
To be a real gentleman, to portray
This person I should, for us both, become,
I'd read of Romans, try devotion to—
Atlases, button-down shirts, and my Mom.
When I'd leave it at home, I would haste through
Her purse to find Cloth to ensnare my snot.
What caused my Mom's faith in this Sacred Cloth?
She went without toys. So, for me she bought—
Button-downs, stuffed bears, books, and tales of the Goth.
Sneezing now, I recall my shirked duty—
Forsaken Cloth, make Mom proud. She is beauty.

Night Lights

Patrina Tyler

They light the night with their lime green candles,
the fireflies as they dance wildly around my head.
They illume each step that I take, on this path that winds to solitude.

By the ocean's side is where I choose to meditate.
At night, the sound of the water powerful waves brings me peace.
A glance up to the sky reveals a perfect full moon,
it hangs like an incandescent light bulb in the sky.
I yearn for moments like this, when all seems right in the world.

Stars that twinkle brightly among the heavens,
cause me to yield…
at such an awesome scene.
I wonder if they were hung one by one or flung passionately by the handful,
by a source unknown?

It's hard not to feel love on a night like tonight,
when the moon charms the ocean with her pearlescent light.
I want to dance, I want to sing, and I want to whirl into forever from this dazzling stage.
I want to soar above the stars and take a bow for love under the spotlight of this moon.

The brilliance of this night, lights more than the night
It lights my heart and mood, making way for my peaceful nights rest.
My soul leaps with joy at the anticipation of another encounter such as this.

Howl Revisited: Who I Once Knew

Dharna Macedo

I saw the best minds of my new found generation wasting away, skipping class to find their next fix of
weed or coke
who are standing with red glazed eyes focused at teachers in front of them or driving drunk
from party to drug run and back again
who are blonde headed, dread headed hippies , buzz cut, khaki wearing preps frolicking from girl to girl
fucking and fighting because who gives a fuck
about morals when you're out of this atmosphere? Threesomes in the back of trucks, fucks and herpes
and fucks and lost souls.
Who steal someone's virginity in the back of a truck with some other girl on top kissing and rubbing.
Charlotte, North Carolina, Matthews, Stallings, Indian Trail, all the tramping ground for whores
and dealers. Blazed out, tits out, naked girls flaunting their assets until black out phase occurs
straight to Twitter or YouTube.
Who wandered around train tracks and golf courses throwing rocks off bridges, ending up in jail
at seventeen years old.
Who grew up Christian always in a church, parents letting God take care of their kids instead of
parenting their own Satan's spawns.
Who got kicked out of schools and lost licenses, who crashed and flipped Jeeps, smoke bellowing
out of their windows, bottle of Jack in the passenger seat.
Who lost their friends to overdoses and car accidents, lost lovers to the love of addictions and kept
whoring themselves to any pussy that that spread from Florida, to

Colorado, to Georgia, to

Virginia they ran smoking their dope, popping their pills, shooting up their heroine, calling it

their time to live and find life before life outlives them, leaving parents at home planning

funerals for their not yet twenty-one year old children. Time runs away with them until they're forty-six and still living in someone's basement smoking reefer and fucking burnt out sloppy whores. No school, no work, no love, no one.
Who die alone because they dropped the only ones who cared, but don't give a fuck now, no one gives a fuck about liars and crooks, fake friends with glazed looks, who smoke and fuck their lives away

without ever extending their minds to their adoring public.

Through Those Eyes

Elizabeth Heffner

Sparkling celadon eyes
that contain an
intricate history—
impossible to replicate.

Many a time they've shredded
a young soul's heart
as it brims with lust,
desiring to obtain attention
from its wearer.

A gently sloping nose—
slightly off-center.
Once broken
and mended.
Another memory
rest in bone and cartilage.

Thin mauve lips
often molded into
a sensual smirk
or a blinding beam,
then revealing
creamy enamel rows
and bubbling peals of joy.

Curved ears
Overflowing with resounding
sounds and voiced moments.
Pierced long ago
one ear hole stretched
from the twisting and tugging
of an impatient toddler.

Elongated fingers
house a shimmering ring.
Diamond crystals mounted
on a seamless gold band.
Connected to worn palms—
Always dry
from the constant
scrubbing of
medical prep.
Creased with the
wrinkles of fate.

Many a time
The pair has soothed
a restless soul,
ruffled through
tangled strands of hair,
flipped through
assorted medical charts
and frolicked on the
mountainous divots
of computer keys.

Strong, wide hips—
"Birthing hips—"
Hips swiveling and
spiraling in
sensual seduction.
They pulse with the
pounding rhythm
blasting through speakers.
Beneath a generous chest
and a xylophone of ribs
lies the ultimate prize,
thumping in an
intricate unusual
dance of its own.
Missing a piece to complete it
but showing others
with a never-ending
cascade of love
and adoration.

My mother.

Fifty Percent

Alina Labrador

My sister and I don't talk much
so we browse bead stores
fish acrylic scraps out of trash bins
while she talks car stereos, geocaching,
and goals.
I think
it would not be hard
to break her wrist, if
you could catch it.

Running errands, I can know her.

It doesn't matter she is six years, three inches older;
or that I was perhaps too dreamy a child
for us to have been friends.

My sister is statuesque; I am plump.
I pine while my sister acts; I fume
where my sister plans and conquers.

She was the only thing hated enough
at six for me to run away from home.

Now she's the only one who calls
to listen first. I have one picture of us
arm in arm.

We love and do not overlap.
We resemble our mother, but opposite halves.

Haikus

Queens' Professors

Michael Kobre:
After many beers,
he falls asleep on the couch.
Dreams of malt and love.

Emily Seelbinder:
Haiku Death Challenge:
Classic literary works
In haiku riddles.

I'll start:
Ripped off Grendel's arm
Sent the Dam to water grave
Dragon left a mark.

Jennifer Bratyanski:
Zombies Do Not Run
For Fear of Broken Ankles
Thanks George Romero

Fiction

Allergen Anxiety

Faith Lippard

The small Siamese fluff ball, whose face reminded Nina of too much of a masked bandit, purred like it had a set of blue marble-glossed eyes in its throat. Or it might have if the marbles were trapped in the wheel of a negligently oiled shopping cart. The sound seemed to grate louder whenever Nina was forced to walk by it in her surely shrinking cement block dorm room stifling with the scent of cat hair, snot, and Nyquil. Even with the window open to cold, dry, Arizona air, Nina's nose needed several tissues pressed against nostrils that had been wet for the last six hours. Nina thought of dog snouts, of the other windows she'd shoved open recently, and of how much she hated cats. Lucky may have been cute, the several month old purebred Siamese kitten that didn't belong to her, if it wasn't currently pricking her flowered pillow case with its paws. The green Nyquil mustache didn't help either.

Nothing was helping Nina's allergies: not the tea she nuked in her mini microwave, not the Benadryl that was making her feel as drugged as Lucky, not even finding her favorite movie, The Godfather, playing commercial free on AMC. Her attention span was about as dead as Sonny Corleone, and she knew the ethics paper she'd hadn't started yet was going to stay a headed Word document until that stupid soccer game was over and her single would be a single again. Single wasn't a label she wanted to think about.

She slammed her barefoot into the section of wooden flooring she knew whined, not caring who she woke up in the five stories below her because she was awake at 4:27 in the morning with no place to sleep other than a now shredded and contaminated lime green beanbag chair. When Nina had tried closing her eyes at 2:15 the up and down of Lucky's breathing was so loud Nina expected to see her blonde, leggy bitch of a lab partner in her god-awful soccer shorts looking down at all of her answers. She was almost too angry to answer her door. But, she was only expecting one person to be knocking past 4 a.m.

In the opened door frame he smiled with a face full of stubble. The No Shave November prickles on his jaw and his long sleeve plaid button-

down would have made someone else look like a slob. He was more like a breathing L.L. Bean catalogue. "Hey, what's up?" He sounded too wired for the hour, but she knew he'd just gotten off work at the bar.

"I did it," she said, stepping back.

Squinting, he followed her unspoken invitation. He nearly tripped over his own Sperry's when he eyed Lucky on her bed. Closing the door with his elbow, he grin-gaped in an expression that reminded her of him. "You seriously did it."

"Whytney, why are you surprised? You asked me to." She wanted to cross her arms in front of her chest, but she sneezed again, and she swore her right ear was stuffed with something soft, like cat dander. Pressing her fingertips into both sides of her forehead, she closed her eyes.

"You're amazing!" He pulled her into a hug. His cleaning solution scented palm was on her forearm, fingers around a limb almost thin enough to be one of his lacrosse sticks. "Nina, you look horrible."

Her eyelids flipped open like the curtains in a black-and-white slapstick film, which reminded her she was missing her movie. "It was really what I was going for."

"I meant," he said, putting emphasis on the sharp "t" at the end, "you look like you're dying in here. Want to stay in my room?"

"Yes."

Whytney chuckled, making his adam's apple wobble against her forehead. "It's kind of messy."

He seemed embarrassed, self-conscience, and in her delirium he was glowing brighter than the red rubbed-raw skin above her lip. She'd kidnap enough kittens to make him a fur coat.

"What's that from?" Nina brushed eraser crumbs from her notebook, trying to think of a TV show, movie, or comedian who'd said whatever just came out of Whytney's mouth.

They were pretending to study in one of the quiet rooms of one of the two libraries on campus. It was the only private area currently available in the building, which was the only reason she liked the space considering it seemed to display them behind the glass wall on the right corner of the third floor like a museum exhibit. The plaque would read *College Students Reviewing for Exams - watch as the female attempts to engage the recently single male into a flirtatious discussion. Some pop culture references may be difficult to understand.*

Whytney put his hand on the top of his head, smoothing his hair down that was too short for bangs. He had a sandwich stashed under the desk in his other hand, periodically breaking off bits of withered white bread with mustard and what smelled like ham to slip between his lips. "It's from me. I'm asking you a question."

"Ok. So, you want me to steal your ex-girlfriend slash my lab partner's kitten?" She frowned. "And that's not from one of the YouTube videos we watched yesterday?"

"Not steal, kidnap. Get it right," he said, smiling.

"The only difference coming to mind is the ransom note, and I'm not good at cutting tiny pieces of paper out of magazines. I also don't read magazines."

He bit his lower lip, tilting his head to the side with a look that meant he wasn't amused. "I just want you to take the cat I got her for her birthday long enough for her to freak out. Then I'll give it back."

She'd missed that face. He hadn't been making it much since he found out from another guy on the lacrosse team that Julia, his then girlfriend of seven months, had been hooking up with some basketball player with a Mercedes. She wasn't too surprised considering Julia was the most self-centered, mooching mouth-breather she'd ever met. Julia never helped with lab reports, experiments, or any of the cleaning. They were both taking the for non-majors course kind of late as juniors and out of the eighty-something other people, Nina was assigned Julia as her permanent table mate and partner. Nina had met Whytney in one of her Communications classes the semester before, but she didn't connect them until the third week when she saw Julia trying to hold his hand outside of the science building. He didn't like PDA. Julia didn't know that. Nina wondered if Julia even knew his middle name. It was Mick, of course.

A group of lacrosse players in backwards baseball caps walked past, a few of them nodding to Whytney.

She waited until he was looking at her again. "How the hell do you expect me to kidnap her kitten?"

He tore off a thick triangle of ham. "Your exam is next Monday, and you're having a study session in her apartment this Friday, right?"

Nina eyed her ethics professor trudging down the stairs with an armload

of handouts. "Yeah."

"Tell Julia ho-bag you're going to the bathroom or something. There are like four doors in the hall of her apartment. Her bedroom is the second on the left after the bathroom. Her roommate, Stacey, lives across from her. Lucky will be in Julia's room because Stacey hates cats and cat hair and kind of Julia. You could open a couple of windows. Stacey sometimes forgets to close them when she airs out the apartment, and they're low enough to make it look like Lucky could have dropped from one of them. Stuff him in a bag or jacket or something. The girls' soccer team plays their rivals Saturday morning so this should piss her off a lot. That's all I came up with so far."

"That's pretty sick."

"You mean amazing."

She cleared her throat. "I'm allergic to cats. Why don't you ask another girl in our study group going to her apartment? They're all athletes. Don't you guys have secret handshakes and shit?"

He laughed, reaching out to touch her knuckles in a way that if it happened in a movie she would have gagged, especially with the mustard smear on his nail. But it was Whytney, and she felt like a twelve-year-old girl mooning over a Backstreet Boys poster whenever he was around. "You don't have to do it if you don't want to."

He thumbed the fleshy part of her wrist. And even though she knew somewhere deep under the excitement ragging her pulse that he was using her just a little, it wasn't everyday that a poster might want to kiss her back.

Nina prepared for study groups like an overly-cautious housewife readied her home for a maid: highlighting notes, dog-earing pages, and ending up so prepared that, just like the maid's vacuum, the group studying was pretty pointless. If making study guides was a class, it would be the only "A" Nina would expect for the semester because this one had been 21 hour killer on top of her event planning internship for 96.5 The Jam and the whole having a crush on a guy with a girlfriend thing had just turned surprisingly better and worse at the same time.

Four girl soccer players sat in a semi-circle on Julia's furniture, their ponytails in a variety of colors like a shelf of identical wigs. After a squeal-fest petting Lucky in front of Julia's cracked bedroom door and a five minute

argument about how to spell "mitochondria," the TV had been switched on and while 16 and Pregnant did have the obvious tie to biological growth, Nina didn't think their professor would be testing them on birth control-phobic teenage girls.

During a glare montage between mother-to-be and her mom, Nina threaded the straps of her tote bag through her fingers. "Julia, can I use your bathroom?"

Julia's focus stayed on the television. "Did you find the answer to number four?"

"No. I thought Sarah was looking for that one. "

"Bathroom's down there." She did some jazz-hand flick behind her ear that kind of indicated the hall.

Nina stood up from the footrest so fast her lower back popped, and she felt almost drunk stepping by the couch and down the hall. She closed Julia's bedroom door and sneezed. Freezing, she imagined her nasal congestion could be heard over MTV Pepsi commercials. Lucky was stilled mid-stretch at the foot of Julia's grossly tidied neon comforter that was clear of anything incriminating. She knew it was stupid to expect evidence of cheating from nearly a month ago. But, it was still disappointing not to see any ultra-slutty lingerie splayed across the bed or even a framed photo of Whytney melodramatically cracked and abandoned on the floor, maybe in black-and-white and definitely placed just right in the sunlight of the window. It was too late for sun now, the three dark slabs reflecting a scary amount of ceramic, stuffed, and quilted feline décor spread around the room.

Flexing her fingers, she unzipped her bag to remove a bottle of Nyquil, a plastic spoon from Wendy's, and a bag of catnip she'd paid for in cash after having an anxiety fantasy of the cops searching through her debit card history. Lucky seemed pretty excited about the catnip, lapping away five cat ruffie cocktail spoons. She stared at his gross scratchy tongue as it attempted to clean the gooey circle around his mouth. According to several Google pages, Lucky would need another 10 minutes before he'd fall asleep.

She didn't sneeze again until she was back in the living room. Julia was laughing at something the girl in the yellow top had muttered obnoxiously out of the side of her mouth. The other two were watching an ad for car insurance.

Yellow shirt was still smirking. "What? I'm being serious. Bar bum to trust fund could totally be a new reality show. You got an upgrade, girl."

Julia coughed from snickering so loud, cheeks turning pink. "Bum would mean he's poor. We should change it to bar loser."

The one with the thick eyebrows and black curly hair who reminded Nina of Chiquita Banana raised her pair of giant forehead mustaches at Julia. She tilted her head in Nina's direction, so Nina decided to sit back down. She was so preoccupied debating over the state of her posture before she'd become a pharmaceutical criminal that she almost missed the girl whisper "her friend" to the queen of mouth-breathers.

Julia snorted. "She doesn't even know who we're talking about." She played with the drawstring of her sweatpants. "Nina, do you know who we're talking about?"

She was pretty sure mentioning her accomplice wasn't wise to do at the scene of the crime. Visibly twitching, she flipped through her notebook. "Um, I wasn't really paying attention. I only heard something about loser."

Sarah, the red head in forest green Nike shorts, laughed. "Loser." She laughed again. "Nice."

Julia rolled her eyes, picking at her nail. "We should get back to work."

They answered two more questions before the T.V. became interesting again, and Nina excused herself with the excuse that she had a small bladder. Back in Julia's room, she felt nauseous. Lucky was conked out, lying unnaturally on his back, but still breathing. She swallowed at least a dozen times. Finally, she grabbed him and placed him in a hollow nook in her bag next to a binder and a banana. She wiped her palm on the bed, shuddering before closing the zipper up to an inch for breathing and opening two windows.

Seconds later, she was sitting in the living room. She swore her insides were going to start leaking from every pore of her body. Even the high school drama they were watching was about lying. And she swore she was one ABC Family melodrama away from completely flipping out like some Edgar Allen Poe character. She hadn't touched anything by Poe since high school English, but the sickly sweltering extra heartbeat taping against her jacket was bringing up all of those repressed tri-fold presentations. Not hugging her bag close to her wasn't an option, because she was sure the

second she put it down, the zipper would give, triggering the binder to flip Lucky out like a Cirque du Soleil acrobat. She wanted to push the bag away, maybe even throw it out of one of Julia's windows. Killing animals wasn't a hobby of hers or anything. She just couldn't handle the swath of breathing heat against her side, or help but imagining how similar Lucky's shape was to a nuked kitty-flavored Hot Pocket.

The only relief came when Stacey, a tall Asian girl, waltzed in on a pair of heels. Stacey gave them an annoyed glance before coming back from her room in a small metallic pink dress to tell Julia she was going out and not to expect her until at least seven or eight the next morning. Nina forced herself to wait half an episode of Gossip Girl after Stacey left before getting out of there, accidentally knocking her bag into the wall of the stairwell.

Nina was cold. So damn cold. She was antsy, uncomfortable, and cold. She'd been in Whytney's room on the first floor several brief times before, but always during the day and never in the dark. When he closed the door, blocking the hall fluorescent shine, there was still a desk light shuddering under a cheap blue lampshade that practically screamed Mom Target purchase. It silhouetted his roommate, who was an unidentifiable blob under several layers of blankets. At the click of the door, he rolled to his side with his face covered to mutter, "Shit, it's freezing," seemingly in his sleep. After filling Whytney in about the specifics of Nyquil and tote bags, he nearly passed out, leaving her to survey the room in the moon glow peeking through his closed blinds. She wasn't tired, but she regretted not taking up his offer to share half his bed. A pile of hoodies on hardwood wasn't her ideal make-shift mattress.

She scratched the back of her ear, shifting, staring at the Yankees poster on his wall. Closing her eyes, she tried to think of warm, sleepy thoughts. Lucky was all that was coming to mind. At nearly five in the morning, an unwatched kitten loose in her room automatically transformed into some stop motion animated devil-creature. It was on its hind legs, skating around with exaggerated pointy eyebrows on her then iced floors, because it fit with the old school Christmas special theme going on in her head. She could see him tearing her possessions apart, tipping his makeshift litter box on to her sheets, meticulously opening and licking every page of every textbook she owned like a conniving little allergen-spreading terrorist.

Balling her fist around a chunk of a cotton jacket, she stood. "Whytney."

He didn't move, comforter up to his elbow, lying on his side so close to the wall he looked like he was trying to hug a laminated Derek Jeter. She tried saying his name again as she reached over to shake him by the shoulder. Having to lean over so far made her realize just how much open space there was on his bed. Not caring anymore about decency or personal bubbles, she repositioned and shifted until she was under the blanket and on her back. Sighing, she shut her eyes.

Nina heard the static of the fabric before she felt him roll over, getting a face full of warm Whytney. She made some pathetic noise of pain, and he pulled back, balanced on an arm and squinting.

"What are you doing?" He sounded only half-awake, slumping down to his elbow then the side of his palm. But he was still looking at her.

She touched his cheek fuzz. "Kissing you."

He blinked. "Okay." He closed his eyes.

She kissed him and fell asleep. It was a thick, still sleep that kept her in the exact same position into the rainy early afternoon, on her back because she'd heard it was the best for her spine. But, it wasn't too good for her face once she felt the force of something smashed against her. It was rubbery, round, and hurt like shit. She was fully awake once the soccer ball was raised and slammed into her again, making a crunching sound this time. And it was like a bad pun because Julia was holding something black, white, and red. Nina touched her upper lip, blood from her nose running over her nails.

"Game was rained out, bitch."

Nina wished Whytney had locked his door, she wished it wasn't pouring outside, she wished she wasn't completely frozen. Julia brought the ball down with a slick thud, and Nina yelled, closing her eyes, and tasting blood.

There was a rush of movement. Disoriented, she found herself sitting, dripping a puddle of vampire-sustenance into her palm.

Whytney was standing with a sticky soccer ball. "Julia, what the hell?"

"I want Lucky, you dick!" She turned to Nina. "You think I'm some idiot, thinking the open window wasn't some cheap whatever…distraction or something. I would have been here hours ago if my roommate got back earlier or answered her damn phone. Are you listening to me?" Julia slapped Nina's hand into her face.

The sting was too much. Nina stood up so fast she was dizzy. She walked closer, Julia backing away with a smirk.

Julia waggled her head. "Oh no, what are you going to do?"

Stepping in a shuffling almost-dance, they were inches from the door. "Do you want to know where your cat is?" When Julia condescendingly nodded, tight lipped, Nina lowered her voice to just above a whisper. "I ate him."

Throwing the door open, she shoved Julia out, slamming it shut and locking it just as the thudding of Julia's fists started against the wood.

"That was sick!" Whytney grinned with his mouth halfway open, holding out a box of tissues.

She grabbed a chunk with a sticky hand, wincing as she gently dabbed them against her face. "How awful do I look now?"

He palmed the stubble on his cheek, scrunching his mouth up. "Um, not that, much, too, um," he said. Hesitating, he sighed. "It looks pretty broken. Okay, definitely broken. But, my mom knows this great surgeon."

He seemed to be searching for his cell phone, but she was too fixated on the word surgeon. She'd never been to anyone other than her family doctor. For all she knew, this "great" surgeon could have hands of karma and completely mess up her face. What if it this was an episode of The Twilight Zone and she came out looking like some morphed cat girl? She wasn't sure if it was the sleep deprivation or the blood loss or the beating on the door that was triggering more Poe memories, but she started screaming.

Whytney dropped his phone in mid-text. "What's wrong?"

A poof of hair popped up from the blankets, and Nina, sure it was somehow Lucky, chucked the box of tissues at it. The thing shook, before lifting to a groggy scowl. It was Whytney's roommate. "Why did you just hit me?" He seemed stunned. "Holy shit, why are you bleeding everywhere?"

Nina didn't know what to say, so she just kept screaming.

The Getaway

Jane Landis

What kind of person are you? Look at you, staring at those pathetic goldfish in the Wal-Mart aquatic aisle. You're pacing, bouncing, from one foot to the other, watching the creatures swim back and forth, back and forth, again and again within the confines of their two-by-one transparent tank. They don't even realize how small their world is, you think, turning away from them to walk to the grocery section. As you walk, no one looks at you. You're not that distinct; in fact, there is nothing extraordinary about your appearance at all. That's how you like it. That's how you plan to get out of this tiny, depressing town; the only way you can afford it. If no one notices you, no one will notice you taking the bag of instant coffee off the shelf and slipping it into your oversized tote. They won't notice the sandwich bread, cans upon cans of nonperishable meats and vegetables disappearing off of the shelves as you pass by. Nobody will remember you once you change your name to Julianne, and then Julianne will be forgotten and replaced by Beth, the further away from home you get.

See yourself now? There you are, sneaking along the edge of the grocery section, blinking way too much, a habit you've formed by constantly straining to look innocent. You press your arm tightly over your bag, trying to muffle the sound of the crinkling tin foil lining that ensures you a safe passage through the security sensors at the door. You've gotten very good at this. After all, this is not only a way to get by. It's the life you have chosen for yourself. Look at that little sticker you have on your wallet, filled not with money, but with random lost driver's licenses and military identification cards. That sticker reads Catch Me If You Can, in identical script to the 2002 hit film. You're your own con artist-in-training.

Now you're in the parking lot. You passed through the sensors undetected, and are now shaking from the adrenaline rush that always spills over you after a successful heist. Your next step, as usual, will be wiggling every door handle in the lot until you find one that can be opened, hot-wired, and taken to a remote location to serve as home for the next week. Sweat rolls down your slight nose until it reaches the tip and drips off,

splashing silently when it hits the sizzling asphalt. You've already yanked the handles of over half of the cars in this low security parking lot to no avail. Everyone locks doors these days; everyone's so suspicious. You look up and over the lot, ready to give up and start walking somewhere, anywhere, with this thirty-pound bag stuffed with clothes and food.

At about two hundred feet away, in the back of the parking lot, you spy hope. There's an old Buick parked with the two front windows rolled down, enough space for your skinny little arm to reach in and unlock the driver's door. With a grin on your face, you bound to the car, reach in, and sigh at the satisfying click of the lock releasing. Within two minutes, you have gotten the car to start, unloaded your things in the trunk, and driven away. Your favorite radio station is playing The Beatles. You sing along to Paperback Writer. You've got about a half tank of gas: enough to get you into the next state, if you like.

There's the exit ramp you want to take. It'll put you onto I-10, a good way to go if you want to make it to Austin by next week. In a city like that, who knows what possibilities would unfold. You could steal a guitar and busk on the street...or sneak onto a city tour bus to learn the information, then give illicit tours yourself. Heck, maybe you could even—

"BOOM!"

The pothole comes out of nowhere. The old car bounces so high into the air that you swear you can feel your stomach hit your heart. A scream hits your ears that you immediately know is not yours; it is high-pitched, almost painful to the ears. Sooner than you recognize the familiarity of that infantile noise, the scream has become a baby's cries. You flip your head around to see what you so wished were not there: a baby, probably not even a month old, judging from its size, is strapped into a booster seat, crying at the top of its lungs. You stare longer than you intend, unable to move. Waves of panic pulse up your body like the shock of an electric fence.

How have you not noticed it there?

Who does it belong to?

What in HELL are you going to do with this?!

There is no place for a baby in the life of an aspiring con artist.

You are pacing back and forth, back and forth, again and again beside the old Buick on the side of the highway. The front tire on the driver's side is

flat, completely annihilated. There's a freaking baby in the backseat and now it's in your care, or lack thereof. You talk to yourself, tell yourself to calm down, think logically about the situation. You're a con artist, you can handle this. You know how to take anything and use it to your advantage, and this is only one of those things. It's not until a pearly-white Escalade pulls over behind you and a sweet-looking soccer mom with wide eyes steps out that you realize what to do.

"Honey, are you all right? Need some help?" drawls the innocent woman, concern in her brow.

Eyelashes batting rapidly, you reply, in an equally Southern accent, "Oh, thank goodness you pulled over, ma'am, I've got a flat tire and a cryin' baby in the back seat!" You gingerly reach into the car and take the baby into your arms, thinking that might be something a parent would do.

"Oh my! Bless your heart. Do you have a spare?"

"N-no ma'am...actually, just before you got here, a man pulled over and robbed me of my things! I was going to the hotel right off this exit here, but now my credit card, phone, and license have all been stolen and I'm so far from home and don't know what to do!" Shut up, shut up, before you go too far and she thinks you're lyi—

"What on earth?! We need to call the police...do you remember what he looked like? His license plate number? Anything?"

"Well, no...I was in such a state of shock, I...didn't look at his face. If I could just get to that hotel, I could call my family and maybe pay for a room that way..."

"Don't you worry, honey, let me take care of that! Now get your baby and hop in so I can take you somewhere safe. The side of the road is no place for a pretty girl and her little baby."

You sit in the plush back seat of the woman's huge SUV, staring straight ahead in disbelief of the success of that last-minute ruse. You hold onto this strange baby; this stinking, snotty, bundle of flesh that you stole by accident. You wonder if this woman already has kids of her own. You barely notice that you've reached the Holiday Inn Express when the door beside you suddenly opens, the smiling lady reaches out to help you and "your baby" out of the car, and you walk into the lobby, fountains tinkling and the smell of fresh coffee floating in the air. You commence with your plans:

"Would you mind taking her to the bathroom and changing her diaper while I try to call my husband and check myself in?" you ask the kind woman.

Of course she will, and she strolls off to the restroom with the child, not a suspicion or tinge of mistrust left in her wake. You're wondering how much gas is left in her car as you stride out of the door, trying to maintain a confident and calm appearance. You find her car where she left it, with the front window down.

As you're driving away, quickly approaching the interstate, you assure yourself that you did the right thing; that the innocently sweet woman would know what to do with that stowaway child. It was unfortunate that she had to lose her car, but it's only one of the many things that assist you in the getaway.

The Head

Holly Lopez

At ten in the morning, there was a knock at Misty Fontaine's front door. Misty didn't hear it at first. She was in her darkened living room watching her favorite film, Rebel Without a Cause, while swirling cheese from an aerosol can onto a plateful of Triscuits. The volume was turned all the way up in an effort to drown out the incessant high-pitched jingle of "Turkey in the Straw" that emanated from the neighborhood ice cream truck and to combat the noisy construction that was taking place on the vacant land behind her property.

The knocking went on for several minutes, but Misty's mind was too caught up in the drama between Buzz Gunderson, Jim Stark, and Judy. Rebel was the first film Misty had ever appeared in. She had just turned seventeen and landed a spot as an extra, thinking it was the start to a promising acting career. Though she had been on the set only briefly, the memory of the experience was remarkably vivid, as though it was stored in the library of her mind and she could pull it off the shelf whenever she wished to look at it. For two days, her gaze had been fixed on James Dean's pompadour, squinty blue eyes, and bee-stung lips. On the second day, when she had been watching him eat lunch under the actor's tent, he was called to the set and left behind a half-eaten sandwich. She slid into his warm, vacant chair and devoured the remainder of his roast beef on rye.

Triscuit crumbs sprayed from Misty's mouth while she recited Natalie Wood's lines as if she, too, was playing Judy. It was during a touching scene between Jim and Judy that her ears detected the rapping at her door. Jim donned a red jacket with the collar turned up, and he was leaning toward Judy as she apologized for being mean to him. Misty paused the movie and waited for the disturbance to stop, but it didn't. After rising from her roost, her liver-spotted hands closed her robe, the one she had taken from Audrey Hepburn's dressing room, as a keepsake from her time on They All Laughed. It had once been snow white and fluffy like an expensive hotel towel, but now it was gray and thin, fraying at the elbows and hem, with egg yolk and mustard stains stuck to the fibers. Misty shuffled to the door in her

bedroom slippers and lightly patted the spongy pink rollers in her platinum hair. She peeked through the curtains and saw a middle-aged woman in a purple velour tracksuit, who looked like a dumpy, low-class version of Ann-Margret. The woman was holding a Pekingese in her left arm and her free hand was still busy knocking.

"What do you need?" Misty said through the closed door.

"It's Fran, from down the street. I need to talk to you.

"What's it regarding?"

"There's a head in your yard."

Misty opened the door, her eyes stinging as they adjusted to the daylight. "What's that?"

"There's a human head in your yard." Fran twisted around and pointed. "I was taking Humphrey for his morning walk, and there it was." Fran had more hair than her head could hold. It was all piled on top of her skull and held in place with hair combs and a thick crust of hairspray.

Misty shifted her body so she could see past Fran. There was a shiny crow perched on top of what looked like a prop from one of the B-horror movies she had worked on. Since it was smack dab in the middle of the large lawn and several yards away from her front door, she had difficulty discerning whether it was in fact a human head. The bird tilted its head back and let out a caw as if to notify its flock of the find.

"It must be some kind of a prank," said Misty. "It can't be real."

"It sure looks real to me. And Humphrey smelled it from thirty feet away. That's how I seen it."

Humphrey had a tiny flattened face with wide, glassy black eyes and a pronounced frown, which were all barely visible underneath thick tufts of cream fur.

"They're predicting another hot one today. That head is gonna stink to high heaven and attract all kinds of animals," said Fran.

"Well, what am I supposed do with it?" Misty shrugged her shoulders.

"You should call 911 before the neighborhood kids see it." Fran started down the steps of the porch and then turned back to Misty. "And you might want to get that buzzer fixed. I hurt my hand pounding on your door."

Misty looked at the doorbell button which was dangling by colored wires, from when she had deactivated it several years ago. She took another glance at the head before shutting the door.

Once Misty had officially retired from the movie biz, she didn't like when things disrupted her privacy. She preferred to shut herself away and watch the films she had worked on, paying special attention to the fleeting moments when she'd appear on screen.

After forty years of bit parts, her only real claim to fame was the time Warren Beatty copped a quick feel of her right breast, during the time she played a high school student in Splendor in the Grass. But she had never given up the hope of having one glorious moment in the limelight. She held onto that dream like a person gripping onto the edge of a cliff. It was her motivation for getting up in the morning.

Shortly after she turned sixty-five, Misty's father passed away, leaving her a modest house on an acre of property in Stuckey, a town near where she grew up. When she got the news of his death, she had been living in a one-room apartment in Yonkers and embraced the idea of spending the rest of her years in the quiet country, surrounded by nature. She spent her time sitting on the back porch admiring the majestic trees or watching movies on her father's old console television.

After her chat with Fran, Misty made her way back to her chair and picked up the handset from the telephone that was on the nearby side table.

"This is 911, please state the nature of your emergency," said a gravelly female voice.

"Hello. There is a head on my lawn and I need it removed.

"There's a head on your lawn?" The operator posed the question with no inflection, like she had received calls like this on a daily basis.

"Yes. A head turned up on my front lawn and I need somebody to take care of it."

"Is this a joke, ma'am?" she said, flatly.

"It certainly is not," Misty said. She took a deep breath and tried to maintain her composure.

"Well, whose head is it?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"There's a hostage situation going on right now at the Pioneer Bank. I don't think there are any units available to check out your head."

"What am I supposed to do until somebody gets here?"

"Ma'am, if it's just a head, it ain't going nowhere."

Misty tapped her foot and wrapped the phone cord tightly around her finger. "Aren't you even going to ask me for my address?"

"What's your address?"

Misty clenched her fist. "51 Two Notch Road."

"52 Notch Road, got it."

"No, don't hang up. I said, 51 Two Notch Road."

"Right. A squad car will come out as soon as one's available."

"Wait. Read that address back to me," said Misty. But there was just a dial tone on the other end.

She returned to the front room and peeled back the curtain from the window. There were two dogs playing tug-of-war with the head. One was a yellow mutt with matted fur and the other was a fat brown basset hound. Misty flung the door open and rushed at them.

"Get away from there!" She swatted them with one of her slippers and smacked the yellow one's flank so hard that it let out a yip. The mutt took off down the street with the basset bumbling behind it. She reached down and returned the slipper to her foot. It was only half past ten, but she could already hear "Turkey in the Straw." It always sounded like it was in front of her house even when it was several blocks away. She started to walk back inside but stopped, deciding to look at the head.

The right side of the face rested on the grass. Misty deduced that it had belonged to a man because it had side burns and short black hair. It looked like something out of Zombie Ninjas III, one of the last flicks she worked on. The skin was pale-green and waxy, and little bits of it had been ripped from the face and neck, exposing the decaying tissue underneath. One of the dogs had torn the left ear, and it was dangling by a slim strip of skin. A few maggots trickled like tears out from under the eyelids. It gave off an ugly putrid smell, mingled with a tinge of sweetness that made Misty gag. She covered her mouth and lowered her head, which was when she saw that the neck had been cleanly severed from its body.

"You okay?" said a male voice.

Misty looked up to see the colorful ice cream truck parked in front of her yard. She had gotten so used to hearing its circusy chime that she hadn't realized it had pulled up next to her. The ice cream man was a fellow in his thirties, wearing tight Wranglers and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

He had blue eyes like Paul Newman that were quite striking against his tan skin. His receding blonde hair was bleached at the tips.

He stepped down from his truck and walked toward her, holding a frozen treat. "Good God! What the hell is that thing?" He had a slight lisp and reeked of Old Spice.

"What's it look like? It's a head."

"Why's it on your grass?"

"How am I supposed to know?" She threw up her hands. "It just turned up here."

"Didja call somebody about it?"

"I called 911 but they didn't seem to be in a hurry to send anyone." She longed to return to the dark refuge of her house and kept looking at her front door.

"It's starting to attract flies." His hand swatted the air around his face. "Well, here, I thought you might could use this. It's gonna be a real scorcher today." He smiled and handed her a Popsicle. His teeth were the same shade of yellow as his hair.

Misty held the wooden stick between her thumb and index fingers. She tapped her rollers with her free hand while inching toward her porch. "Well, thank you for the ice pop."

"Don't mention it." He climbed back in his truck and drove slowly away.

She went back to her chair and watched forty minutes of her movie before there was another rap at her door. It was Fran again, with Humphrey held captive in her arms.

"I noticed that the head's still there. Did you call the police?"

Humphrey squirmed and growled as though he had more important things to do with his day. His body ran like a motor as he panted in an effort to cool down from underneath the blanket of fur, and his pink tongue poked out of his black mouth like a little piece of ham.

"I called 911, but I don't know when anybody's going to show up," Misty said.

"Can't you call again? The kids are gonna be traumatized by that thing."

"They don't look traumatized." Misty pointed toward the head.

While Fran was talking to Misty, two young boys had run over to the head and were jabbing it with broken branches. The ice cream truck was

teetering down the street and rolled up along the sidewalk in front of Misty's house. The pair threw down their sticks and bee-lined to it. A tan arm poked through the window and handed one of them an ice cream bar.

Fran put a hand on her hip. "That's certainly not something children should be playing with."

"Well, that truck is going to draw them right to it, if it stays there," Misty said. She was becoming increasingly irritated that the head had become her responsibility just because it had shown up on her property.

"Please, just call again." As Fran walked across the yard toward her own house, she kept looking over at the head. Humphrey tried to wrestle free of her grasp, impatient to have his chance with it.

"This is 911, please state the nature of your emergency," said the same voice as before.

"I called earlier about the head on my lawn. When is somebody coming out here?"

"Ma'am, I told you somebody would go over there when they could. This line is for emergencies only."

"But it's been an hour since I called you, and people are hassling me about it."

"Ma'am, do you realize that it's against the law to call 911 when it's not an emergency?"

"But, it's a human head." Misty returned the handset to its cradle once she realized the line was dead. She poured herself some iced tea and went out to her back porch. She sat in an old cane rocker, sipping from a mason jar, and watched giant John Deere tractors scoop up big chunks of earth. For the past several weeks, Misty's peaceful existence had been violated by the construction workers and their machines. First, the roaring chain saws ripped through the forest, and then she was subjected to Lynyrd Skynyrd blaring from boom boxes and shrill beeps that warned when the bulldozers were backing up. No one seemed to care that this commotion was disturbing her. She couldn't even enjoy the serenity that the countryside was supposed to offer.

When Misty finished her tea, she retreated to her bedroom for a nap. She popped plugs in her ears and slipped under the worn sheets. Once she drifted to sleep, she dreamed she was on the beach, kissing Warren Beatty

while the waves rushed over their bodies, like Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr in From Here to Eternity. Warren had just yanked down the shoulder strap of her bathing suit when she was awoken by a banging on her door. She opened it, expecting to see a pair of police officers standing on her porch, but was dismayed to see Fran and Humphrey again.

"It's been over two hours since I told you about that head, and it's still there."

Several people had gathered around the head. Some had their arms crossed and heads tipped to one side, like they were viewing a museum exhibit. A few of them placed a wide berth between themselves and the head, and were only a few steps away from Misty's porch.

"Where did it come from? Has anyone called the police?" said a man with spidery legs in denim cut-off shorts.

"I don't know. I think Fran is asking the owner of the house," said a heavy man in a sweat-stained wife-beater that was a size too small for him. His navel looked like a gaping mouth gasping for breath under the tight white cotton.

A brunette in a green terrycloth sundress covered her daughter's eyes. "Don't look at it, Shawna," she said.

The ice cream truck pulled up again, and the small crowd meandered toward it, while keeping their eyes on the head.

"I called 911 again," Misty told Fran. "It's not my fault that nobody came."

"Well, I just phoned the local news. That should get somebody's attention." As Fran pivoted to leave, Humphrey's bushy tail brushed across Misty's face. He turned his head back to look at her, to show that he was rather pleased with himself.

Misty called to Fran. "The local news? Am I going to be on TV?"

"If they show up," Fran said.

Misty palmed her rollers and scurried into the house. She went to the spare bedroom that she had converted into a dressing room. There was a big antique mirror on the wall, framed in faux gold. Facing it was a dressing table cluttered with hairspray, false eyelashes, cosmetics, hair brushes, and perfume bottles. Stuck to the mirror were pictures of starlets like Marilyn Monroe, Natalie Wood, and Doris Day. The rest of the room was crammed with racks of clothing and costumes, protected within plastic garment bags.

The walls were plastered with framed pictures, and posters fixed at the corners with yellowing tape. Most of the posters featured movies like The Clown Murders, Zombi 2, The Flesh Eaters, and Blood Feast. The framed photos had signatures scribbled in the corners and were of cast members from films such as Splendor in the Grass, Some Like it Hot, and Rebel Without a Cause.

Misty sat on a tufted velvet stool and plucked the Marilyn Monroe photo from the upper corner of the mirror. After she positioned it in front of herself, she slipped the rollers out of her hair. With a pick and a big can of hairspray, she tried to create Marilyn's hairstyle. When she had checked all angles and felt she had successfully replicated it, she took out make-up brushes, sponges, and puffs. She sponged a layer of bisque foundation on her face, layering some extra on the violet veins that mapped their way down her nose and across her cheeks. With a skilled hand, she ran black liquid liner across the lids of her watery blue eyes, and then filled in her sparse brows with a chubby brown pencil. After applying berry rouge and plum lipstick, she lightly swept powder on her face with a big fluffy brush. She had been careful to apply just enough color to look good for the cameras yet not appear garish under the unforgiving light of the sun.

She unzipped a garment from its plastic cover, and revealed a black sequined evening gown with a plunging neckline. She had bought it almost forty years ago at a second-hand store, intending to wear it to a gala event like a movie premiere, but she had never gotten invited to anything like that. An interview with the local news would be an opportunity to have cameras aimed directly at her, and an occasion to finally wear the dress.

She removed her robe and housecoat. Her flesh hung like biscuit dough around her middle, and she tried to push some of the sagging skin under the waistband of her girdle. Once she had slipped the gown on, she moved from side to side in front of the mirror. Though she bore more of a resemblance to an aged Barbara Stanwyck than she did to Marilyn Monroe, she was pleased with her appearance. She felt pretty, and she hadn't felt pretty in a very long time.

A mob was gathering in front of Misty's house. Some people had brought lawn chairs and coolers to her front yard. A girl had set up a lemonade stand on the sidewalk and was selling cupfuls of it for a quarter. A long line roped

around the ice cream truck. Parents were keeping a close watch on their children and scolded them if they ventured too close to the head. A news van was parked in Misty's driveway. Two men were standing close to the head. One had a large video camera hoisted on his shoulder, and the other was busy snapping photos with a small black Minolta. A tall blonde in a red suit with matching lipstick was making her way up the walk. Misty lifted her chin and straightened her back. Her eyes scanned the collection of people. She waited for them to look up at her before descending to the walkway. Her hand lightly grazed the railing while she slowly glided down each step. She liked the way the sequins on her dress sparkled in the sunlight, and she hoped others had noticed it too.

When the woman saw Misty, she slowed her pace and looked her up and down. "Um...hello, you must be the owner of this residence. I'm Gail Green with WXSC news." She had a microphone in her left hand and held out her other one for Misty to shake.

"I'm Misty Fontaine. Am I going to be on television?" Misty looked past Gail toward the video camera.

"Yes, Mrs. Fontaine. I'd like to interview you about the head."

"It's Misty Fontaine."

"Oh, okay."

"Listen, will you be giving me a script to read from? I'm very good at memorizing lines. I've been an actress for many years."

"That's nice." Gail smiled. "No, you won't need a script. I just want to ask you a few questions." She made her way over to the head and spoke to her colleagues.

Misty stood in various places, trying to determine at which angle she wanted to be filmed.

The ice cream man hopped out of his truck with a stack of ice cream sandwiches and started handing them out to the news crew. It was midday, and Misty was concerned that the heat and humidity would cause the makeup to slide from her face.

Gail returned, followed by her cameramen. "Okay, Miss Fontaine, we're ready to interview you. I'm just going to ask you a few things about the head and then we'll be done."

"Could somebody check my makeup for me?" said Misty.

"You look fine," said Gail.

Misty fluffed her wilting hair with her hands and took a few deep breaths before signaling that she was ready.

"We're here at the home of Misty Fontaine who is having a most unusual problem today.

Misty, when did you first notice there was a human head on your lawn?" Gail tipped the microphone toward her interviewee.

Misty looked straight into the camera and smiled. "Well, first I want to say that I'm so honored to be here. I've worked in movies most of my life. I've even had lunch with James Dean. But, I must say that I'm very tickled to—"

Gail took back the mike. "That's great, Miss Fontaine, but I'd really like to hear about the head."

"Well, I was watching Rebel Without a Cause when my neighbor knocked on my door to tell me about it. Did you know that I was in that film?"

"That's nice, but, about the head..." Gail pressed her lips together and glared at Misty.

"I was getting to that—" Misty was suddenly looking at Fran's back.

"Hi. I'm Fran Jones from next door. I'm the one who found the head."

Gail's smile returned. "Great! Fran, can you tell me when you first discovered it?"

Misty moved from behind Fran. A small seed of rage formed inside of her, and it was sprouting rapidly. It was one thing to step aside for a star like Natalie Wood or Marilyn Monroe, but there was no way she was giving up the spotlight for the likes of Fran Jones. She forced her face close to the microphone. "It's been on my lawn all day," she said.

"So, Fran, where do you think the head came from?" Gail shoved the mike under Fran's lips.

"I don't rightly know. I suppose that construction might have dug it up."

"And what did you do when you first discovered the head?"

"Well, Humphrey is really the one who found it. Isn't that right, precious?" She scratched his head with her purple press-on nails. "Then I told the lady that lives here, but she didn't do nothing about it."

Misty gave Fran a swift shove, causing her to tumble backward onto the

grass. Humphrey was loose and ran straight toward the head. He grabbed hold of the hair and snarled while he tugged at it. The throng of people crept closer to the women. Gail and her crew stepped back. She quietly told her guy to keep the camera rolling. When Fran got back on her feet, she ran toward Misty and smacked her in the jaw. Misty fell into some low holly hedges. She put a hand to her face and ran her tongue over her teeth. Spiny leaves scratched her arms and legs. The sound of laughter singed her eardrums. Her face felt scalding hot and the nerves near the surface of her skin were pulsating.

Fran brushed grass and dirt off of her backside. "What a lunatic," she said.

Misty rolled herself out of the shrubs and landed on her knees and palms. Fran was walking past Misty while calling for Humphrey. Misty grabbed Fran's ankles and pulled her feet out from under her. Fran's arms flailed in the air before she fell to the ground. She crawled over to Misty and grabbed hold of her dress strap. The neighborhood residents formed a circle around the women and cheered Fran on while the two pawed at each other's hair and clothes.

"Scratch her eyes out, Fran," said a pregnant woman in a Budweiser t-shirt and striped clam diggers. Sticky chocolate crumbs from an ice cream sandwich formed a moustache across her upper lip, and she was tearing into the wrapper of her second one.

The woman's pudgy son licked a Nutty Buddy while leaning against her hip. "Yeah, get her, get her," he said.

The crowd spread out when a police cruiser pulled up behind the news van. The siren let out a sharp wail, and then two officers jumped out of the vehicle and dashed to the scene.

"Break it up, ladies," said the portly one, as he hiked up his baggy trousers.

The cops took hold of each woman and pried them apart.

"She hit me first," said Fran. Her arms were restrained behind her back, but she was swinging her feet at Misty. "I'm just finishing what she started."

The tall, muscular cop was holding Misty. His fingers were digging into her ribcage. Misty's arms and legs felt weak, and her head lolled like a limp dandelion.

Misty and Fran were told to sit on the porch and behave while the officers spoke to Gail. Misty's premiere dress was torn, and there were sections of sequins missing. One of the straps had ripped at the seam, exposing her tattered taupe bra. Fran had a grass stain across her cheek, and her mass of red hair hung on the side of her head like a tangled skein of yarn. Humphrey had come back to her, and she was cradling him in her arms.

"Fran was just defending herself," the pregnant woman explained to the cops.

"Okay, okay," said the tall officer. "We got a call about a head. We'll deal with that first and then we'll straighten out the altercation."

"Where is the head?" said Gail. She raced to the middle of the lawn with the policemen. "It was right here," she told them. "We have it on film."

The cops returned to Misty and Fran. "Did either of you see somebody take it?"

Both women shook their heads.

"Who the hell would snatch a human head?" said the man in the jean cut-offs.

"What if it was the killer?" said a teen-aged girl. There were bits of ice cream cone caught in her braces, and she was picking them out with her fingers.

"A killer? Oh my God! What if there's a killer living among us?" said a woman with blue cotton candy hair who was hunched over a metal walker.

"Calm down, everyone," said the tall cop. "We'll get to the bottom of this."

Rounding up the bystanders was challenging because some of them had scattered when the siren sounded. The policemen questioned those who remained and took down their names. The ice cream truck had left, and parents were trying to calm their whiny kids who still wanted treats. Gail and her crew packed up the news van and backed onto Misty's lawn to get past the police cruiser. Misty and Fran were free to go once they had told the officers all they knew about the head. Fran carried Humphrey home while murmuring expletives under her breath.

Misty went to her dressing room and peeled off her damaged dress. Tears poured from her eyes as she wiped her make-up off with cold cream. Things never went the way she wanted them to. She was ashamed to look

at her reflection and felt like an old hag who was of no use to anyone. Her fingers pried the photos from the mirror and stacked them face down. Out of habit, she went to her chair in front of the television but didn't feel like watching movies. Instead, she went to her bedroom and laid down on top of the stiff quilt. She couldn't stop thinking about her tussle with Fran. Her cheeks burned from humiliation. "You're nothing but an old fool," she said. She rolled over on her side and looked at the photo of Marilyn Monroe that was on her nightstand. Her hand picked up the frame and threw it against the wall. She cried until she fell asleep.

A throbbing pain in her jaw roused Misty from her slumber. When she looked at the clock, she was surprised to see that it was after midnight. She took out a bag of frozen peas and held them to her face. After pouring a glass of iced tea, she sat on her back porch, relishing the quiet that she missed since the construction had started up. She used to enjoy inhaling the sugary fragrance of the magnolia trees and watching the long arms of the giant oaks sway in the breeze. Misty felt a lingering empathy for the trees, which were nothing more than disposable background. The modern machines had torn them down to make room for some flashy duplexes. New ones would be planted as if the old ones never existed.

The moon was full, and its soft glow blanketed the barren earth. Misty craned her neck and moved to the edge of the porch. She leaned on the railing and cocked her head, almost certain that she saw the bobbing beam of a flashlight near a sleeping bulldozer. Her eyes darted around the construction site, and made out the silhouette of an ice cream truck. The glass slipped out of her hand and shattered. The bright beam was suddenly aimed at her. She held a hand to her eyes to shield them from the blinding glare. Footsteps were heading in her direction, and they were getting louder.

Misty hurried to her bedroom. Her fingers fumbled in the closet for her father's double-barreled shotgun. After pulling it out, she lowered the barrel away from the body of the gun, eyed the two shells in the chamber, and brought the barrel back up until she heard a click. Her ears pricked at the sound of the creaking hinge of the back door. She inhaled a deep breath, and then softly made her way down the hall. The floorboards groaned in annoyance each time her foot rested on them. She undid the safety catch and propped the shotgun on her shoulder before entering the living room.

The ice cream man was sitting in her chair. His hands were folded neatly in his lap. Dirt was embedded in his skin and fingernails. "It's not polite to spy on folks," he said. His eyes casually perused the room.

Misty pointed the barrel down at him.

"I should actually be thanking you. If it wasn't for your scrap with that broad, the cops woulda gotten to the head before me."

Misty tightened her grip on the shotgun. Her heart thundered in her ears.

"You've got quite a movie collection." He picked up the VHS box from the side table. "Rebel Without a Cause. That's my all-time favorite." He smiled and flashed a crooked row of cheddar cheese teeth.

"I was in that movie," she said.

"Is that so? I thought you looked like a movie star. I knew it as soon as I met you." He stared deep into her eyes.

"Really?" said Misty. Her trembling lips formed a slight smile.

"I heard them laughing at you today." He leaned back in the chair and crossed his ankles. "I know what it's like. I been laughed at my whole life; treated like I don't matter none."

Misty's hips began to ache, and she shifted her weight from one side to the other.

"It ain't right, them laughing at you like that." He shoved a hand in her box of Triscuits and crunched one in his mouth. "A pretty gal like you deserves respect."

Misty lowered the shotgun and turned her head away. "I'm not pretty anymore."

He slowly stood up and ambled toward her. "Why, sure you are. And not just pretty, but movie star pretty." His hand lightly stroked her cheek.

Tears streamed down Misty's face. She wanted to believe him.

"There, there, no need to cry now." He wiped away her tears with a rough thumb and left a dirty smear across her face.

The ice cream man gently wrapped an arm around her neck and pulled her close to him. Misty let him. His whisky breath mingled with the scent of sweet soil.

"It's a shame we haven't met before," he said. "Seeing how we got so much in common and all. What's your name, anyhow?

"Misty Fontaine."

"Well, that's a movie star name if I ever heard one."

Misty looked him in the eyes. "Is your intention to kill me?"

"Kill you?" He laughed. "Why would I go and do something like that to my new friend? I'm actually planning on getting outta this town and I just now been building up the courage to ask you to come along."

"Me? But I'm old. I'd just slow you down."

"That's nonsense. You proved this afternoon that you can hold your own."

"But I can't just leave here." She rested the shotgun against her leg.

"Why not? What's keeping you here?"

Misty thought for a few moments. "I guess nothing. But what would we live on?"

"I dunno, but that's half the fun, darlin'." He winked at her.

"But what happens if you get caught?"

"I sure hope I don't. But I guess folks would assume me and you is partners, and we'd both be famous."

"Famous?"

He grinned. "What do ya say, Misty? You wanna spend the rest of your life in this dump or do you wanna really live?"

"I want to live," she said.

"Let's go then. My truck's out back." He walked toward the door.

"How many people have you killed?" said Misty.

"Too many to count," he said.

Misty raised the shotgun and pointed the barrel at his back. She squeezed the trigger hard.

The wooden butt of the gun punched her shoulder and kicked her backward. The slug blew a hole through the ice cream man's knee and he dropped. The empty shell clinked when it bounced off the hardwood floor. A glaring white, ragged bone poked through his flesh. His hands scrambled to cover the gaping wound, but the blood poured through his fingers.

"You crazy bitch!" He reached for the doorknob and tried to pull himself up. His hand was slick with thick black blood, and he slipped back down.

Misty steadied herself and moved closer to him. She cocked the hammer and fired another round. The slug made a sucking sound as it sunk into his abdomen. Blood oozed from the coin-sized hole.

"I'm gonna kill you," he whispered. His hands sloshed in the growing puddle of blood on his gut as he squirmed like a freshly severed worm.

Misty picked up the phone receiver and dialed.

"911, please state the nature of your emergency."

"This is Misty Fontaine. I just shot the ice cream man."

A Safe Place

Brynn Feeney

He left in September, when the air was almost dry and leaves stayed fresh with the ruddy colors of autumn. I knew Momma didn't care, but I didn't want him to go. I followed his wheeled suitcase down the cement walk, where the Cadillac sat parked by the curb.

"Daddy, can't you stay?" I said. He paused a moment to kneel at my level. Resting his hands on my shoulders, Daddy looked me deep in the eye.

"Val, baby, I wish I could, but Momma doesn't want me to. Be good while I'm gone, ok? And remember that I love you and your brothers more than anything." He kissed my forehead, hopped in the car, and drove away. He never came back.

Sundays were rough after that, and I stopped going to church somewhere between twelve and fifteen. Momma didn't care much about that, either. I figured it wasn't worth worshipping a God that had already let me down. If God couldn't make Daddy stay, then all hope was lost. So why go and pray for nothing, when that was all I had left?

Daphne tried changing me. Lord, that girl was a die-hard Christian. She read her Bible daily, knew each hymn by heart, and never used the Lord's name in vain. I couldn't understand it, or comprehend her attitude for that matter. Completely mesmerized by something she couldn't even see.

"They call Jesus our Savior for a reason, Val," Daph said to me, "because only He can bring our souls to salvation." I didn't believe a lick of it, but I listened anyway. I didn't have the heart to shoot her down, and not because I'm a particularly compassionate person or because she was my cousin. Daph was my best friend, plainly put, and her goodness set my heart to shame. She saw the absolute best in everything, even me.

I wanted to be that way, but it didn't come naturally for me. I found happiness fleeting, coming and going like a passenger of emotion. When I felt it, I held on as long as I could. For the moment it left, I fell back down again. I pushed through days on pure will of mind and the motivations of everyday obscurity, like sunshine through broken glass and graffiti on highway bridges that spelled out "I love you" to strangers passing by. It's

the little things that count, a voice whispered in my head. Without the little things, nothing matters much at all.

I started living by details. It became my way of staying sane. Life at home was hectic, and I felt a constant need to slow it down. Momma worked nonstop and was barely around. Gabriel and Bentley, both eleven years old, ran free of parental control with her gone so often. I didn't like it, but what was I supposed to do? I didn't know the first thing about being a mother. For God's sake, I was hardly competent at being a teenager.

Daphne had the whole adolescence thing down way better than I did. She was the social butterfly, never without a new boyfriend. She wore them like accessories. Maybe it came with being a cheerleader, you know, like an unspoken requirement or something. I mulled it around with the rest of my thoughts when I felt analytical. There wasn't exactly enough room in my brain to debate such an issue though, so usually, I just left it alone.

I remembered those elementary years when teachers used to give us mini-motivational speeches, claiming we could be whoever we wanted if we put our minds to it. Well, I discovered it's all bullshit. I surely didn't want to end up like this, a lonely runner with a hidden depression.

Each morning was a quest for redemption. I'd stand in front of the tarnished mirror mounted on my bedroom wall, and gaze hard at the reflection. The girl staring back at me was awkward with long legs and skin too fair. Daph tried to smooth me over, playing with my heart through compliments.

"Girl, I want that hair of yours so bad! Talk about the nicest shade of strawberry-blonde you've ever seen!" she said whenever I wore it down. I disagreed. Her glossy mane of ebony was far more beautiful. I guess my eyes were the only quality I could stand. Perhaps a little oversized, but they were a peculiar shade of icy gray with tiny specs of blue.

"You have your daddy's eyes," Momma once crooned not long after he left, "same color, shape, and everything." A half-smile broke her lips as she lightly stroked her ring finger, back and forth. She didn't wear a band anymore. Ever since Daddy went away, she'd left it bare. I knew enough by then not to respond or ask questions. I let Momma do the talking. I wondered every single day why she'd made my father leave, yet I refused to ask. I wasn't sure I wanted the truth if it were to taint my image of Daddy.

It sounded like ripping out the stitches of a past wound and digging deeper, only to find that wonder caused more pain than understanding.

"Hey, Daph," I turned to her suddenly, "do you think I'm gonna make it?"

She stopped abruptly. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm not really sure." I drew a blank and noticed that my feet ached horribly. We'd been walking through the park for a long time. I'd just been too caught up in thought to give it much mind. I did that a lot. It must've annoyed people when I spaced out mid-conversation. Nobody realizes how hard thoughts are to hold on to, though. My brain was always running, a washing machine without an off button. I hated sleep because I wasn't good at it, and if it were physically possible, I would've stayed awake forever.

"C'mon Val, it's obviously important." Daph eyed me warily. "I told you it's unhealthy to hold stuff inside."

A cloud that had been blocking the sun floated aside, releasing the light. My eyes watered in protest and I squinted in return.

"It's just...it's..." I breathed in slowly. "Oh, I don't know what it is, Daph." I waited, but she didn't speak, so I continued. "It's like this bad feeling that's always with me. I have it all the time, every day. It's suffocating, like there's some lump in my throat that won't let go. Daph, it's just so hard to go around feeling like a piece of me is missing." A tear formed and trickled down my cheek. Instead of wiping it gone, I watched it fall and break on the pavement.I imagined myself as that tear, plunging into nothingness.

Daph took a step forward and hugged me tight. And that's where we stood, in the middle of the empty park. The wind whirled around us and the sky changed from light blue to dark blue, and back again. Shivers ran through my limbs, not from the breeze or Daph's touch, but from a source of realization that I failed to place.

We stayed silent the whole walk home. Daph didn't ask me to explain, and I knew she never would. She was one of those intuitive people who understood without being told. I have to admit, although I was thankful for Daphne's courtesy, I still needed feedback. I wanted her to analyze me the way she did everyone else.

After crossing the threshold of our white-paneled townhouse, I went straight upstairs. It wasn't even six yet, which meant Momma wouldn't be home for at least another three hours. God knows where the boys were, they

were absent almost as much as Momma. Cautiously, I stepped into my room and shut the door behind me. I dropped my bags and collapsed on the bed, sprawling my body full length. The lavender quilt grew warm beneath me and I closed my eyes, letting my consciousness sink. By the time I woke up, it was dark outside and I could hear murmurs down in the kitchen.

So, I feel like half a person, I thought to myself. Of course, that makes no sense since I'm obviously not cut up into pieces or anything. Ugh, but it's not like that. It's empty, right in here. Touching my chest, I frowned and sighed deeply. I guess it would be logical to think Daddy's absence is the cause. I mean, there's all that talk about how children with single parents don't grow up correctly. I don't think that's really it, though. Daddy left because he and Momma didn't work out. I could try asking Momma, maybe, but I'd rather not. She wouldn't appreciate it, and I don't want see her upset. Besides, what's wrong with leaving the past to the past? I groaned and turned over on my stomach.

The bedroom door creaked open and Momma strode in, interrupting me. "Val, what are you doing?"

"Just resting, I guess."

"You guess?"

"Umm, ok, I'm sure that I was resting."

She seemed angry. "Don't be smart with me, Val. Mr. Kesler was on my case the whole damn day and I'm not up for any more."

"Jeez, sorry for being another problem in your Friday," I said.

"Fine Val, have it your way. I'm sick and tired of your goddamn comments! I work over sixty hours a week just so you and your brothers can treat me like shit! You kids are just ungrateful, spoiled…"

She wasn't up for my "comments." Well, I wasn't up for her verbal abuse. Without a word I got up, moved past her, and headed downstairs. I hurried out the front door, not bothering to close it. The air was cool as I strolled along the sidewalk.

About three blocks later, I turned right and trudged along a marbled walkway. I halted at a pair of massive oak doors. I took a slow breath and went inside. The aisle was long, much longer than I remembered. The altar seemed huge, even from a distance, and I noticed the crucified Son behind it, nailed to a sculpted cross. A musty odor of weathered hymnals and aging

carpets filled my nostrils. I'd forgotten about that too. Carefully, I took a seat in one of the pews.

I'd never seen such a pretty place. Daph had said that would happen in a church. "Everything looks more beautiful in that light. It's something about God being stuck in such a small space with all of us. If he's going to be there, he might as well make it nicer than usual."

I bowed my head and waited, with the quiet soaking in. Warmth began within me, and then a calm settled. There was a peace, it seemed, that wrapped around me and through the open space. In that moment I understood, for the first time, that I wasn't alone.

Siren Song

Alina Labrador

I was always here: the patience in the crabs that sit in crevices, the devotion that keeps barnacles enthralled, the declarations of winds that smother the ears—inside these things, I was always here. My skin was stolen from sharks while they were new. The walls on the horizon of winter squalls and my eyes are cut from the same grey. My lungs are the lungs of whales calling across oceans.

Listen to their timber and canvas moan. Listen to the sea grind against itself; the rock slowly yield, the reef slickly grow; listen to it all tearing what they throw in it to pieces. This volcanic rock and I are both curved and carved from the whipping sea. We measure the tide when they lumber past, and sometimes, measuring, wait. We marvel that they taste of sweet water, freshwater blood.

We were a week out when James noticed one of the seagulls that followed the clipper's wake dived for a scrap and vanished into the water. I was not pleased about the development; the naturalist was thrilled. Then again, he had actually paid to cross the Atlantic with us in January; we already knew he was mad. The man went by Doctor Schmidt or Shrodinger or something else vaguely German, and he had a real talent for blocking doorways I needed to get through. He was of middling height but somehow stooped, constantly sweating, with spectacles that reflected the light. He had an air of nervous excitement which reminded me of a pudgy schoolboy afraid to be caught cheating.

He was also a gossip, and generous with his personal supply of gin, so it was not long before someone mentioned to the kind doctor that I had first noticed something in our wake, preying on birds. They also told Schmidt this was not the first time it had followed us on our trade route to Boston. After that there was no peace to be had. Schmidt hurried about like he wanted to sing.

Two days into the voyage he had accosted me during supper to wheedle things out of me.

"Mister Thompson, if you do not mind my saying, the stew today was particularly delicious." He had some sort of lisp, or perhaps overpronounced his e's. It was hard to tell. I was hungry and he smelled like trouble. When I didn't answer he continued.

"I have noticed, Mister Thompson, that you are a very solid sort of man. Your men respect you. It seems to me your are, shall we say, a trustworthy fellow." He leaned forward and spoke in a stage whisper. "I have been led to believe that you have seen what is considered a mythical creature."

I looked up from the stew. He wagged his eyebrows at me.

"I happen to be quite interested in this sort of creatures."

When I didn't respond he gained momentum.

"We are living in an era of science. Things which a century ago we thought to be myths are now scientific truth! Who is to say that the legendary beasts are not also based in fact?" I stood up with my empty bowl and there he was, in the way. "The ocean is inmense, Mister Thompson! If the fearsome sperm whale can live in it comfortably, why not the kraken? If the jungles of the Americas hide poisonous frogs and pirahna fish, how can we discard the possibility of the reputed serpent in Scotland? The world is more than large enough for these wonders. At least," and here he sounded conspirational, "that is what I believe."

I counted to ten. "Frankly, doctor, the topic bores me."

He smiled with pursed lips. The effect was oddly grotesque. "I'm sure it will become interesting as our voyage progresses."

I should have known.

It had rained viciously all afternoon, water blowing sideways. It had been a good shift; most of the traps had crab, nobody'd done anything stupid and I had my favorite Miles Davis album playing.

Cassel's voice buzzed on channel six to my right. "Yo, Thompson, the biologist's poking around again."

So much for nothing stupid. "Well, tell him to get the fuck off deck!"

"He's got something with him," Cassell stounded hesitant, which was unusual. "I think he's dragging something over the side of the trawler."

My stomach clenched. Shit.

"What's he doing?"

"He's just... looking over."

"Then get him belowdecks. No bullshit." I thought of how I was going to hand that marine biologist his ass once I got a hold of him. I had radio silence about five minutes. Then five more.

Four different channels started shr icking at once. I couldn't understand any of it. "What the fuck did you *Thomas*! Is he bleeding Shit The hell is it Get help."

"Somebody talk to me. Standby! Standby channel sixteen. Hold on, damnit." Finally, I got something coherent.

"The doc caught something, Thompson!" Everything paused.

"Well, what is it?"

"I have no fucking clue. You better come down." And then, as I was about to tell him off he shouted, "Holy shit. He caught a fucking mermaid!"

By the time I reached the upper deck, the violence was over. The night was opaque with stormclouds, the sails uneasy, but we had a moment of calm.

McNeil and Jameson had been slashed along the arms; thankfully their wounds were shallow. Someone mentioned they'd kept the mermaid from killing Schmidt. The wood railing was cracked in several places, a plank or two torn clean off. I saw on one cleat a frayed bight of rope; the rest lost overboard. Schmidt sat awkwardly, clothes shredded, a spectacular bruise already spreading on his gut. By the way he sat, I suspected one of his ankles was broken. Served him right.

Even that could not discourage him; he gesticulated, frantic that someone take the specimen below this moment. He'd found some sailcloth to trap it in, now also ruined—I added the canvas to the cost of damages. Two sailors hurt, my ship mangled, and a thing out of nightmare to show for it. I almost tossed it back out of spite.

"Elijah, take our passenger below before I roll him off my ship."

The naturalist had managed to drug the thing, so we hauled the canvas bundle below without resistance; it nonetheless took three men along with myself to carry it.

We struggled to maneuver our way down. We slipped and bumped our shoulders against the tight spaces. There was an incredible smell of seaweed and salt and fear. Our sweat made our hands slippery. We shifted grips, grunted, made our way downward, restless. I accidentally caught James's eye, and we quickly averted, looking for corners, beams, steps, anything that wasn't our package or each other.

We got the thing belowdeck, ponderously, each in our private turmoil.

Here was the legend, pebbly and weird under the cloth. This was the fantastical object countless sailors had worn on their helms proudly as a talisman, carved in safe timber. This was the thing that had led men to drown, men who dived eagerly to their deaths, following a song into the deep. The damn German had caught it, the thing we had glimpsed in noonday crests, that we'd thought we heard during the watch at night. The animal we had suspected, denied, joked about; the animal we had privately, secretly believed in, and now could no longer deny.

It seemed delicate, in an unsettling, anorexic way. It reminded me of my daughters, skinny and barely into teenagehood, braces and big eyes.

But only briefly; a second look, and you saw its skin had a metallic sheen, like whaleskin. The curves that had seemed like small breasts were muscle, and its oversized eyes were reptilian, double-lidded. There was something about it totally unlike the warmth and welcome of a human; something that had been carved by the sea for a million years. Something that had never known sunrise or rest.

It gave me the creeps.

We carried it slowly, me and Joshua, Arroyo and Conner, and from their looks as we set her down, they were shitting themselves as much as me. We all knew there were unfriendly things in the water, we were a superstitious lot. But like my grandma used to say, it's not the same to call the devil than to see him come. This thing wasn't human, but it wasn't some fairytale illustration, either. It was a wild animal, and we had no idea how the fuck to get rid of it.

Who are they, tender things made of courage, that crawl on the skin of the sea and call it theirs? They name it "she," and naming it, recall their women's petty rages and pliant curves? Who are they, who think their stiff boats are stronger than the vast fluid impetus of waves?

I wonder if they build everything atop barbs. I wonder if they catch their mates with hooks, make their houses with keening timber, iron bars and tortured thread. I wonder if they trick all their food with bait, if they steal all their songs, if when conversing with each other they always lie.

We couldn't just toss the mermaid in with the crab, so I found it an old fish tank I'd gotten years ago, when I'd hoped to spend most of my time on land and keeping a saltwater tank was a clever idea. It was wedged between a bunch of other crates in the cargo hold; it'd never made it off the boat. It was only later that we thought to put the poor bastard in the bilge, where at least it could move a bit.

I'll admit, there was something satisfyingly ridiculous about a mermaid in a glass tank inside a rusty steel fishing trawler. The drawback was, the damn fishtank reinforced the marine biologist's impression it was some pet he could poke at. He saw the sunken cheeks and big eyes and gills protruding like ribs and thought it was frail. A helpless adolescent, but nude; conveniently not a human being.

"Dr. Schmidt, this isn't some cute doll out of a children's story. It's all muscle."

He sat outside the circle of light, looking more sinister than usual. His glasses glinted dully, reflecting the stains on the table and empty chowder bowls. Those gold frames were an antiseptic film between him and us. The sea wasn't alive to him; there was no salt always crusted to his eyelids.

"I have to study her. Do you comprehend how groundbreaking this is? Everything we know about marine mammals, about evolution, turned on its head."

The creaks of benches under our weight was a chorus of discomfort. I scratched at the stubble on my jaw. "Look, I get that it's important, but leaving you alone with the animal? No. It's just not safe."

"Once she's sedated everything will be completed in minutes. It's almost laughably simple."

"You're not listening. I'm not leaving anyone alone with that thing."

He placed the tips of his elbows fastidiously on the table, steepling his fingers so that all I saw of his face was the round reflections of myself and his perfectly oiled hair. His speech became clipped.

"To be perfectly frank, Mr. Thompson, I have no guarantee that any of you would not sell this discovery to the highest bidder. I found this creature, and I intend to have her go down in the annals of history as mine."

"We saved you from her."

The tips of his fingers were white. "I don't see how that's relevant. I identified her."

A few guys looked like taking a swing at him. I leaned forward on my elbows, and they settled some.

"To be perfectly frank, professor," a few of the men smiled, "this is my boat. You have exactly as much freedom as I give you. And you are annoying me." I stared at those glasses as if there was a soul behind them. "If necessary, I will confine you to quarters. I have fishing to do and no time to worry about your safety."

The tendons stood out in his jaw. He stood and stalked out without an answer.

I breathed deep and looked around me. Our faces were umber and purple, half-beards and heavy eyes. I wondered for the fiftieth time what I was doing.

"Jonah, you and Cassell are taking a break."Their eyes sharpened on me. "Pay stays the same. But I need you to watch the biologist. Make sure he doesn't get in the cargo room. I don't want to be the guy to pick between dead mermaid or dead biologist." They nodded, they understood. Good men.

We knew it was carnivorous, but the mermaid seemed reluctant for the raw fish we tried to feed it. I had the nasty suspicion it preferred warm-blooded things, but none of us would kill birds for it. It would not touch sweets, nor bread. Eventually it occured to someone to feed it pickled onions, which it ate voraciously, snatching the open jars we pushed within its reach.

It was how it refused to meet your eye that really unnerved me. I found myself musing about it. Perhaps mermaids did not speak face to face; they sang to each other like whales, across leagues, with no purpose to facial expressions. The creature snarled and grinned as thoughts crossed its face, like wind rippling the water, without pattern.

At any rate, we could not know whether its eyes focused out of the water, any more than ours did under it. Maybe we were simply a long smear of porridge-colored sound to it. Maybe it did not meet our eyes because we were nothing but coarse, hostile blurs of humanity.

Who are they, to come lapping at my scales, to come with their salt-stained hands and sunburned mouths to me? I am no woman to be run aground under their mammal legs, no shell to be pried open for pearls or meat. My throat has no caresses to sing.

That night it sang. One shift was throwing the last crab cages, one shift already eating dinner when it began. A soft keen, vibrating up the iron bones of the trawler. It was a ship-sound at first, metal contracting; I dismissed it.

But the sound swelled. The mess hall fell very still.

The few of us that had dragged her in traded looks across the room.

It became weird wail, and then a music note, and then a voice. A song. An uncomfortable arpeggio. The ocean itself groaning. It pained old fractures and swollen joints. I saw shivers and men rubbing their aching knees. The song was beautiful, very cold. Savage. I thought of Greek myths, Orpheus singing a dirge to Eurydice. The storm crying out. I remembered Jeff's burial, after the war; Amelia's hands on the folded flag, the bright brass of dress uniform buttons. Her face blank, beyond weeping.

The sound grew louder. It was in the metal, the glass, our soles, our bones, our teeth. My ribs resonated, skull ached. We shifted uncomfortably. My stomach dropped low, dread leaching into it. I violently missed my daughters, my own bed. Life stretched before me, tedious, violent, slow. I longed to hide from it and sleep; longed for darkness, for the all-encompasing comfort and weight of water.

Fred was the first to crack. A wail trailed out of him as he sprang for the door. Like ice splintering, our stillness cracked apart, someone caught his elbow, someone else stood to bar the door. As the room focused on calming Fred, I felt the weight in my stomach drain, and the song faded out. No man alone could have withstood it.

No human is made for that kind of rage.

Despite my warning, the idiot Schmidt repeatedly attempted to get at the creature. When I pointed out that his precious legends painted the mermaid as dangerous, he brushed them off. The singing, apparently, did not unnerve him as it did us.

I began posting men at the door to the bilge hold, but none would stay more than a few hours at a time. It would sing to them.

A week after catching it, someone at supper tested a flute he'd been carving, and the mermaid replied. The song wandered around the flute melody, almost like a fiddle, and sweet; unlike any sound from a throat. It was beautiful, breezy, oddly cheerful.

I should have expected the result. Poor Jonah had been on guard at the time. O'Reilly rushed down to the bilge and collapsed at his feet, weeping to be let in. Begging to see the mermaid. It took an hour to calm them both. Jonah trembled as he babbled at me.

"The way he was begging, Captain—like it were his dying wife on the other side—didn't even think to push me… just begging and crying at me."

An anxiety was taking root within us; I saw it in Jonah, in myself. The thing could not be contained long. We could not stop it, and there was no bloodless way to let it go.

I had a legendary creature on a rusty fishing trawler. A wolf by the ears. How do you dump it without losing a limb? How do you keep the psychos and the trophy-seekers from shooting them down?

A week and a half of singing, of men weeping, of fucking Schmidt strutting around with his grin. I knew he'd get in soon, whatever I tried. I was wearing out, having to stay alert; my sporadic heartburn had become a constant burn within me. I saw the men's eyes turning glassy. A few were losing weight.

We were all wearing out, resisting the mermaid's singing. Schmidt was close. He could smell the blood in the air.

I think the animal could, too.

I was here before the first seeds stumbled by mistake into the sea; before their siblings grew into the trees they felled to build ships that keen as they pass. I know the things the timber weeps as it holds sailors in their sleep. I am what lies beneath riptides and the violence made the day they stabbed columns in the sea and called them piers; under the planks, in the churn, in the fleeing fish and the swirl, they created me. But I was also already there, long suffering as the coral that yearns to meet their hulls and bite them aground; a patient grief that drives the slim iron barges to weep rust, the wind rage that shreds canvas sails. I was always here, the child of glowing fish in the deep, but it was they that named me. I am nothing but what they needed me to be.

The song woke me. It had a newly-mint sound to it, almost joyful, and gentle. Sunlight rippling on water. I lay still, transfixed, Lord knows how long. Then the song moved, like wind on a good day on the water: curving, whipping, salty. It was pleasant, but also eager; it made me uneasy.

I remembered the naturalist and his glinting spectacles. Uneasy, I dismissed pulling on boots and headed for the door. The knob was stuck. Water sometimes swelled the wood, so I braced and pushed harder. The door jiggled but did not open, and a suspicion wormed into me. I looked into the keyhole.

It was thoroughly jammed with wax. I could have strangled the naturalist.

For a moment I considered the costly lock, my weary men, the animal I didn't want in my hold; I considered leaving Schmidt to his well-earned fate.

The song changed again, this time low-pitched and warm. I could have sworn it smelled like coming home to supper. Welcoming. My skin prickled; the mermaid was singing for someone.

That did it. I opened my writing desk and loaded the pistol. I hated the thing, but even a loud, gunpowder weapon was a weapon. I stood sideways of any shrapnel that might bounce off, cocked it, and shot out the lock.

I rushed through the dim ship in a haze. I was nearly to the bilge before it occured to me that I could not hear my crew. Schmidt would have locked their barrack as well, damn him. I had no time to go back; the melody was rising, growing tense, and I was terrified of what was on the other side of it. The hold door was ajar; the dark below looked dense and hard. I could not hear the steps creaking over the song. At the bottom of the ladder, I crept foreward.

Schmidt had his back to me. There was a guttering lamp in his hand, and the glint of a glass syringe in the other. I had every intention of dragging him out by his coat quickly as I could manage; then I saw the mermaid.

No, not a mermaid. We had called her that because it was comforting, because of Andersen's love story. We had called her it because we wanted to believe the thing was an animal, something brute we could chain. We should have thought of Odysseus, tying himself to the mast; of Greek monsters waiting on rocks, carnivorous and clawed.

The siren was upright like a snake, weaving slightly, rising out of the sloshing bilgewater. She was nearly outside the light, and her flat eyes were fixed on Schmidt. In the darkness they were all pupil; shallow and reflective as a fish's.

I saw her throat moving with horrible clarity as she sung. The sound was awesome; resonating in my ribs, my pelvis, my jaw, echoing back on us from the curved walls of the hull, unbearable.

For a stretched moment a single note held, growing thin and sharp. I imagined the shoreline receeding before a tidal wave. Schmidt took a step, within reach.

Too quick to follow, she lashed; the lamp fell and went dark. I didn't hear him cry out.

I flattened myself against the hull, my stomach clenching. The ship around me creaked and adjusted, the water sloshed. I couldn't hear anything. There was a sigh; a repeated thump against the wood. I thought of snakes wrapping around mice. As my eyes adjusted, I made out the hulking shadow of the siren in the dim light that streamed from the top of the stairs behind me. For an eternity, she was a mass of coils, heaving and rustling. I tried to shift toward the stairs.

Two bright green disks looked up, right at me. The air halfway to my lungs stopped.

The shine of her eyes, low on the ground, rose in front of me. She was immense. I was aware how tilting my head back to look at her bared my throat. Deep-sea fish eyes.

She moved past me. Fixed to the iron hull, I heard scales clicking over the stairs, the ring of hands smacking down onto the metal, and the awful, muffled thumping of a body hitting each step. The sound continued, echoing back down, for a long time.

After an eternity, I summoned the remains of my nerve and followed. There was a wet, vaguely bloody smear where she'd gripped things, and no other sign of the monster. Everything was sharp and brightly lit. I stumbled through my ship braced against walls, afraid of collapsing.

On deck, it was a cold, beautiful night. We had a gibbous moon. The wind was gentle, the trawler swayed comfortingly at anchor underfoot. It was several minutes before I found the guy on watch. James. "Trouble sleeping, Thompson?"

"You hear the thing singing earlier?"

"Yeah. Quieter than usual. It was actually kinda nice to listen to, tonight." His silhouette against the sky was relaxed. I swallowed a sour taste.

"I'm going to give her a look over, if you don't mind. Clear my head."

James shrugged. "Holler if you need."

I knew I wouldn't find anything.

I am buffetted by tides and propellers; I am wary of tidelines and fishing lines. I chase their wakes for the easy blood of seagulls.

They came joyfully when I finally cried, tearing their waterlogged bodies open on the rocks; even as I finally gave in and destroyed them, they came to me, dreaming. They mistook my whale lungs for lullabies. They taught me to bait. They taught me to sing.

Coming to the stern, I looked out at the dark water. It glittered, solid. The wind slid past in one liquid sound, and the sea stretched out across the world, calm and alive. How many things lay curled under the thin peel of the water's surface, biding their time? A very thin skin, made of silence, on which to hope to be held up. We were such a tender, hopeful thing, this ship upon a titan ocean. A thing of pitch and threads, sheet steel and rivets, holding on to life.

I wondered how many things lived clinging in the water, hating it.

Stretching away from us was the ship's wake, meek and ineffectual. A evanescent mark of our passage. A shallow road. The merest of ripples in the dark water, silent and soon gone.

I am the sea. I am fish-blooded. I will devour them all.

Art

In Ages Past

Jane Landis

Fly Away

Rebecca Kelley

Soigne

Deirdre Ryan

Bird Song

Bree Stallings

Lydia

Elli McGuire

Oh, Brother

Deirdre Ryan

Light Post

Shakeela Mays

An Túr Solais

Melissa Hinchman

Winter Sky

Danielle Phillips

Adrift

Elli McGuire

Over a Ways

Elli McGuire

Counting Petals

Melissa Hinchman

Carson

Elli McGuire

4.30.11

Danielle Phillips

Camouflage

Danielle Phillips

Bye Bye Birdie

Jessie Hunt

With Hair Like Calligraphy, Writing Letters No One Ever Readers

Bree Stallings

Femininity

Andy Wertz

Down the Line

Elli McGuire

Hiding Spot

Melissa Hinchman

El Momentum Se Conserva

Alina Labrador

Row, Row, Row Your Boat

Jessie Hunt

Sarah

Brittany White

Kiss of the Spider

Andy Wertz

Fields of Gold

Jessica Cocks

Oakland

Deirdre Ryan

art fiction nonfiction poetry